All Our Secrets Laid Bare

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All Our Secrets Laid Bare

by firethesound

Summary

Over the six years Draco Malfoy has been an Auror, four of his partners have turned up dead. Harry Potter is assigned as his newest partner to investigate just what is going on.

- Translation into Italiano available: All Our Secrets Laid Bare by fangtasia, firethesound

Chapter 1

Harry Potter hated Mondays. He really hated Mondays after he pulled weekend rotation. And he *especially* hated Mondays after he pulled weekend rotation when he had to spend those extra two days with his bloody stupid partner who was a—

"Bloody stupid thorn-in-my-side lazy-arsed bastard *shit*," Harry muttered aloud, and a passing witch gasped loudly and leveled a sharp look at him as she went by. "Erm, not you. Sorry. Good morning!" he called after her as she hurried down the hall. He sighed and turned back around. That'd probably end up in the papers. Those sorts of things always ended up in the papers.

Harry went ahead and blamed this one on Heppner, too. That stupid arsehole.

He'd dragged himself into work this morning after only a few hours of sleep, and discovered a summons from Kingsley waiting for him in his office. Harry thought that being only half an hour late was entirely reasonable, considering he hadn't tumbled into his bed until nearly four in the morning, but he'd probably be hearing about that from Kingsley too. He sighed and walked a little faster.

Harry managed to avoid inadvertently offending anyone else on his way to the Head Auror's office, and he knocked briskly. The door swung open to admit him, and Harry stepped inside.

"You wanted to see me?"

Kingsley looked up from the folders he had spread out across the desk before him. He flipped them closed and pushed them aside. "Shut the door behind you," he said.

Frowning at Kingsley's serious tone, Harry did as he was told and felt the faint tingle of magic that meant that the Silencing Spells layered around the room had activated as the latch clicked shut. He'd expected Kingsley to sound exasperated, maybe even frustrated that he'd have to scrounge up someone new to join the unending Parade of Potter's Partners, as Ron had dubbed it. Not that he'd have a rough time of it, really. There never seemed to be a shortage of witches and wizards ready to leap at a chance to work with the greatest legend of their time.

But it never took them long to decide that working with the Chosen One wasn't all they thought it'd be. Half of them were shocked to discover that he didn't simply step in and save the day with a snap of his fingers time and again, and he actually expected them to pull their weight and, god forbid, actually *do work*. The other half were so awed by his mere presence that they'd fall all over themselves to agree with whatever he said, even if it was complete rubbish. It took that bunch longer to catch on; they always went through an extended period of confusion while Harry grew increasingly irritated with them every time they agreed with him about something.

Heppner was one of the first type, and he'd made it almost three months. Not Harry's best, but certainly not his worst. (Amelia Homestead, four days, he'd accidentally made her cry.) In

any case, it definitely wasn't unusual for Kingsley to assign him a new partner on short notice, and Harry didn't understand why he looked so damn somber about it.

He decided it couldn't hurt to be overly respectful. "Permission to explain my actions, sir?"

Kingsley sighed and rubbed a hand over his eyes. "You can drop the formality, Potter, you're not in trouble. Though I feel I would be remiss in my duties as your boss if I didn't spare at least a few words regarding your actions toward Auror Heppner."

"He put the investigation at risk." And had nearly got Harry killed by whinging about *overtime*, of all the bloody things, in the middle of a bloody stakeout. He'd been overheard and Harry had been forced to fight his way out of the most vicious duel he'd faced in his five and a half years as an Auror.

"You left your partner *Stunned* and *Body-Bound*."

Harry frowned. "I put a Disillusionment Charm over him and sent off my Patronus for someone to come get him. He was perfectly safe."

"Regardless, standard procedure dictates…" Kingsley trailed off and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm not having this discussion with you. And I'd suggest you study H.A.R.D. if you honestly believe it was in any way acceptable to leave your partner Stunned and Body-Bound in an alleyway."

And Disillusioned, Harry added in his mind but knew better than to say it aloud. He pulled a face at the mention of the Handbook of Auror Regulations and Directives. It was notoriously thick and heavy, and the last time Harry had used it as anything other than a doorstop had been when he was a trainee and faced daily quizzes on its contents.

"In any case," Kingsley went on. "I didn't call you into my office to discuss your actions."

That threw Harry. "Sir?"

"This is about Auror Malfoy."

Harry felt a mild tug of alarm. "What's happened to him?"

"Not to him," Kingsley said, his eyes as dark and serious as the expression on his face. "To his partner."

"Oh god," Harry murmured as he sank down onto one of Kingsley's hideously uncomfortable guest chairs.

Malfoy had joined up with the Aurors at the same time Harry had and they'd gone through training together. And after the five and a half years that had passed since they'd both graduated from training, Malfoy was the one person in the department who could rival Harry for sheer number of partners. Most people assigned to him couldn't see past the Mark on his arm and got away from him as soon as they could. Malfoy drove off the rest of them with sharp scowls and a sharper tongue. The first year had been worst (he'd gone through fourteen

partners as compared to Harry's twelve) but after that Malfoy had managed to stop being quite so much of a prick, and his partners began to last longer.

Then the accidents had begun and rumors had started to fly. The first two, in Malfoy's second and third years, really did look like accidents. A trip and fall down a staircase that ended in a broken neck, and a heart attack. If anyone else had lost two partners within a year like that, they'd have gotten sympathy and compassion. Malfoy, being Malfoy, had gotten mistrustful glances and people muttering suspiciously behind his back.

But it wasn't until the third death occurred a year and a half after the second that the rumor mill had really spun up. Malfoy and his partner at the time, a young wizard straight out of training, had gone to investigate an old Death Eater property assumed to be abandoned. It hadn't been, and somewhere in the chaos of the ensuing wandfight, the boy had taken a Dark Curse to his back and spent two days delirious in St. Mungo's before dying.

Like everyone else, Harry had assumed that Malfoy would quit or get fired or otherwise vanish after that. He, and everyone else, absolutely hadn't expected for a middle-aged witch with steely eyes and twenty years of Auror field experience to volunteer to partner with Malfoy. To keep an eye on him, she said, because someone had to do it. That was just over a year ago, and even though they'd spent the first half of it openly loathing each other, recently they seemed to have settled into something resembling a functional partnership. The rumors had dwindled, and Harry had assumed that'd be the end of the whole bad business.

"What's…" he began and his voice failed him. He cleared his throat and tried again. "What's happened to her?"

"She's dead," Kingsley said flatly.

Harry exhaled sharply and slumped in his chair. He'd expected to hear that, but his stomach still twisted to hear it. "And what's that got to do with me?"

Kingsley folded his hands on the desk before him and leaned forward, his eyes boring into Harry's. "You're going to be Auror Malfoy's next partner."

"I… what?" Harry blinked. Of all the directions he'd expected Kingsley to go with this conversation, being partnered with Malfoy hadn't even registered as a possibility.

Kingsley leaned forward a fraction more. "After word of Auror Parsons' death reaches the media, we are going to have a cry of public outrage the likes of which we have not faced in a very, very long time. They need to see us handling this situation, but if we confront Auror Malfoy or fire him without the evidence necessary to take him into immediate custody, we run the risk of him going to ground. I need you, Harry, to find me that evidence."

Harry drew in a slow, even breath to hide his surprise. "You think he's guilty."

Kingsley leaned back in his seat. "Harry, once is an accident. Twice is a coincidence. Three is suspicious. Four is, well, four is simply too much. These deaths have been increasingly violent, and you are the only one I trust to not become number five." He met Harry's eyes and regarded him seriously. "I'd rather not keep him on at all, but we can't risk losing him

entirely if I cut him loose now. I need to keep him where I can see him, and you, Auror Potter, are going to be my eyes."

"Malfoy's not going to be happy about me investigating him," Harry said.

And that was one hell of an understatement. While Malfoy and Harry finally had a relationship that could be described as 'civil,' they'd only achieved it because their lives rarely intersected. Other than one highly uncomfortable conversation during the first week of Auror training where they'd essentially called a cease-fire of their schoolyard feud, they hadn't interacted at all beyond a polite nod if they passed in the hallways or a few lines of stilted smalltalk about the weather if they happened to share a lift. It was pretty safe to assume that Malfoy wouldn't appreciate this sudden intrusion into his life.

"Malfoy won't know you're investigating him," Kingsley said with a sigh that told Harry he should have worked that out on his own. "He'll be told that you're in need of a new partner after your… falling out with Heppner. And that his partnering with you will have the added benefit of protecting him from the worst of the public's outrage that we haven't fired him once news of Auror Parsons' death becomes public."

"He won't like that either," Harry said.

"No," Kingsley allowed. "But he will accept it."

Harry sighed. "When do I begin?"

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Draco stared down at the mess of papers on his desk—his former desk, now—and blinked against the sudden hot prickling behind his eyes. He looked up at the ceiling and breathed slowly in and out, in and out, bringing himself back under control. Malfoys did not cry, not even in the privacy of their own offices. Or in their former offices, he reminded himself bitterly.

In a remarkable effort of self-discipline, Draco swallowed back the threat of tears and again tried to force his attention to his paperwork. But his thoughts would not obey. They kept returning to thoughts of Parsons, despite every effort he made to bloody well *focus*. He hadn't been anything even close to friends with her, but after long months of hostility they'd finally settled into a grudging partnership. At the end, he'd even come to sort of like her, and he thought she might have sort of liked him as well. Or at least tolerate him with some degree of warmth, and most days Draco thought that was the best he could expect from anyone. But now Parsons was gone.

Along with his career, the only thing in his life worth getting up for each morning. True, he'd only started it as a way to rebuild the family name his father had so thoroughly destroyed

during the war. But, unexpectedly, he'd come to love his work. For the first time in his life he'd felt like he was doing something *good*.

Well not anymore. Surely they'd fire him after this. He'd been under heavy suspicion after the third death, and Parsons would push things right over the edge. So he'd already packed his own personal belongings, and if he'd thrown them into the trunk with a little more force than was really necessary, well, there wasn't anyone else here to say otherwise, was there? Now, all he had left to do was get the last of his paperwork in order and take it down to Filing…

A sudden knock at the door scattered his thoughts and then the door swung open before he had a chance to do anything more than look up, never mind invite his guest to enter. Noting the lack of common manners, he really shouldn't have been nearly this surprised to see Potter standing there. Draco's mouth opened, then closed wordlessly.

As with every other time in recent years that Draco found himself within Potter-ogling range, he found himself momentarily speechless at how bloody *good* he looked. Potter had filled out some since his Hogwarts days. A full year of intense training plus the better part of six more as an active Auror had put a layer of muscle on his skinny frame, and his green eyes gleamed as brightly as ever behind those same stupid clunky glasses, and Draco had the ridiculous urge to run his fingers through that appallingly messy hair that somehow looked so inviting. And when Potter's mouth curved into a very kissable little frown, Draco realized he was staring.

A surge of irritation with himself twisted through his stomach. He'd come to terms some time ago with the fact that he liked men. But damn it, this was *Potter*. He'd spent his boyhood hating Potter, and his career avoiding him. With great success, too. Occasionally they passed each other in the halls, and Draco was always careful to duck his head and avoid eye contact after the requisite polite nod. And they'd ended up sharing a lift three times, not that he'd kept count or anything. Each of those rides had seemed longer than the last, and he'd very studiously avoided looking at Potter at all, just stared ahead at the small dial that clicked down floor by floor as he tried to ignore the scent of Potter's soap and the way that his hair, still damp from his morning shower, curled enticingly at the nape of his neck. And now Potter was standing before him, looking smug and handsome and unattainable and—

He worked up a really scathing sneer and caught Potter's gaze before he drawled, "I should have known they'd send *you*, Potter."

And he really should have seen it coming. It was just the cherry on top of this disaster that was masquerading as his life.

"Send... me?" Potter repeated dumbly, his frown deepening and his brow furrowing as if he really had no idea what Draco was talking about.

"Oh, I'll just bet you're enjoying this, aren't you?" he snarled, his hands clenching into fists. "Well, you needn't bother. I know why you're here."

Potter blinked. "You do?"

Draco glowered at him. "Of course I do. And you can just save your breath and go tell them I'll be gone by this afternoon."

"You're leaving?" Potter blinked again and wrenched his eyes from Draco to look around the room. His gaze swept over the empty shelves and open trunks and stacks of paperwork and then snapped back to Draco's face. "You're packing."

"It's a relief to see that those ugly glasses do more than just clutter up your face," he muttered. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have quite a bit more work to do before I can leave." He picked up a stack of papers from his desk and flipped through it, pointedly ignoring Potter.

"Why are you leaving?" Potter asked, and he sounded genuinely baffled. Draco honestly had no idea he was such a good actor. "Is this about Parsons? I'm sure if you need—"

A harsh laugh burst out of Draco's throat and maddeningly he felt like crying again. He ducked his head to his paperwork. "Really, Potter, I know you're enjoying dragging this out but you can drop the act. I know I'm fired over this."

"Is that what you think I'm here to tell you?" Potter asked. That kissable little frown was back.

Draco frowned back at him, thought he was fairly certain his frown looked surly rather than kissable. "Isn't that what you're here to tell me?"

Potter dropped his eyes to the ground and scuffed at the carpet with the toe of one shoe. "Erm, no. You're not fired. But, um..."

"Out with it, Potter," Draco snapped. Apprehension squirmed in his stomach.

Potter fidgeted and hesitated, then sucked in a breath and the words came tumbling out.

"I'm your new partner."

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In the span of five seconds, Malfoy's face shifted through as many different emotions. First, his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open in pure shock. That quickly morphed into horror, which slid rapidly into panic, which was visible for only a split second before becoming outrage, which quickly chilled into a cold fury. He rose to his feet in one fluid motion, with a glare on his face that had Harry taking a quick step back despite himself.

"What. Did. You. Say." He bit out the words, his steely eyes so intense that Harry could practically feel them boring through his skull.

"I, er, seem to have lost my partner last night." Oh, of all the stupid bloody *tactless*— "Er, not like you lost, uh. Well, he left, and what with. Um. Parsons and all, and Kingsley thinks that this way will keep the worst of the media off you, so… I'm your new partner."

He didn't think that Malfoy could possibly look any angrier than he already did, but somehow the fury intensified as Harry rambled.

"No you're not."

"Yes I am."

"No you're not."

Harry frowned. "Yes. I am."

"No. You're not." Malfoy seemed unaware of just how childish he sounded.

"Yes I am! And before you tell me again that I'm not, I am!" Harry burst out, exasperated. "Head Auror Shacklebolt assigned me. There's nothing to be done for it."

Malfoy glared at Harry for a long moment, then swept past him and into the hallway almost before Harry had even registered that he was moving.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked, jogging to catch up.

"To see Head Auror Shacklebolt," Malfoy snapped at him. "If he assigned you to this, he can bloody well *un*assign you."

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but quickly remembered that this was Malfoy. The only thing arguing with him would accomplish would be irritating him ever more. Best to just let Kingsley deal with him, then. Harry sighed and chanced a look at Malfoy as they walked.

Harry hadn't been this near him in quite a while, and if he didn't know better he'd say that Malfoy was avoiding him on purpose. Not that he'd have any reason to want to be around him, really. Malfoy disliked him, that certainly hadn't changed since Hogwarts. And physically, Malfoy hadn't changed much either. His face was still all pointy, his limbs long and slender. He'd grown his hair out some and now wore it tied back in a short tail at the nape of his neck, despite the fact that it was just a bit too short for that and some of it always worked its way loose. Somehow Malfoy, being Malfoy, managed to make it look good. The locks fell artfully over his forehead and temples, framing his face, and looking just disheveled enough to make one think about think about...

Harry gave his head a quick shake.

...well, to make one think about things that he really shouldn't be thinking at all about his new partner. Especially not his new partner who was also Malfoy and would hex him into next Tuesday if he knew that Harry maybe sort of found him just the tiniest bit fit. Harry winced inwardly at his own rambling thoughts and then very deliberately set them aside.

They reached Kingsley's office and Malfoy rapped sharply on the door.

"Enter."

The word was barely in the air before Malfoy had shoved the door open and stormed inside. Harry trailed after him, shutting the door after himself and activating the Silencing Charm that surrounded the room. Less embarrassing for all of them afterward, that way.

To Harry's surprise, Malfoy didn't just start ranting. He stood, eyes burning fiercely, waiting for Kingsley to finish with the paperwork in front of him and look up to acknowledge him. Harry dropped into the chair he'd occupied not ten minutes earlier and waited for it all to go pear-shaped.

After a few minutes, Kingsley set the files aside and met Malfoy's stare. "May I help you, Auror Malfoy?"

"I would like for Auror Potter to be reassigned."

Much to Harry's surprise, Malfoy's voice was controlled. Not calm, as the anger bubbling beneath the surface was all too apparent, but he hadn't started yelling as Harry had half-expected him to. Kingsley glanced at Harry, then returned his even gaze to Malfoy.

"And where would you like Auror Potter to be reassigned to?" he asked mildly.

"I don't care, so long as it's away from me." Malfoy managed to keep the anger out of his voice this time. He sounded perfectly calm and in control, even though the way his eyes burned gave away his feelings.

"I assigned him to you myself," Kingsley say, less mild now. "Do you, after only six years as an Auror, think that it is your place to tell the Head Auror that he has made a mistake in his assignments?"

Malfoy hesitated, then drew himself up. "No, Sir."

"It's all settled, then. Auror Potter is not going anywhere, unless it's along with you." Kingsley reached for his paperwork again.

"I don't want him with me," Malfoy said.

"I beg your pardon?" Kingsley's voice was low and calm as he looked up. Harry winced; he knew the unspoken warning that tone held.

Malfoy clearly heard it too. He hesitated before continuing. "I don't want him. He said he's been assigned to protect me from the media fallout, but it's really to protect you. So that when the media catches wind of Parsons' death, it looks like someone's holding my leash. And I don't want—"

"Auror Malfoy, you are out of line," Kingsley snapped. "Yes, I have done what I feel is best for the department. This is not your decision to make. You can either be partnered with Harry, or you can have your resignation letter on my desk by five o'clock today, do I make myself clear?"

Malfoy stiffened, his shoulders squaring back and his chin coming up a bit. "Yes, Sir."

Malfoy shot a glare at Harry, and Harry gave him a helpless little shrug in return. For the first time he realized just how much Kingsley let him get away with. He'd never been given orders the way Malfoy just had. The realization made him a bit uncomfortable.

"Have you made your decision or do you need some time to think on it?"

"I'll stay," Malfoy muttered, then added, "Sir."

"Excellent, because I have here your first case as partners." Kingsley slid a thin folder across the desk to Harry.

Harry opened the folder and flipped through it. Wizarding duel that had gotten out of control on a crowded street in Muggle London. Both of the duelers had been arrested and taken to the Ministry. The Muggles had been rounded up and were being held awaiting memory modification. Harry flipped through it again, but nothing else made itself apparent.

"Sir, this case looks like it's all wrapped up," Harry said.

"It's not. If you haven't noticed, there are almost a hundred Muggles in need of memory modification."

Harry could only stare. They were being assigned to *clean-up duty*? He hadn't been tasked with this sort of thing since he was a trainee. Technically this sort of thing fell under the purview of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol, though if they found their department stretched too thin then some of their cases would spill over to the Aurors, who typically handled the more dangerous or complex cases. When that happened, the MLEP cases typically went to Auror trainees as a good way to get their feet wet, so to speak. It was unheard of for a fully trained Auror to waste his time on something so trivial.

While he was still in shock, Malfoy grabbed his sleeve and yanked him roughly to his feet, plucked the file from his hand, and drew him to the door.

"We'll take care of it," Malfoy said to Kingsley.

"What the fuck," Harry muttered the moment the door shut behind them.

Malfoy looked up from leafing through the file to give Harry a sour look. "What's got your knickers in a twist now, Potter?"

"We're being assigned to clean-up! God, this is ridiculous. We haven't had to pull clean-up since we were trainees."

"No," Malfoy corrected bitterly. "*You* haven't had to pull clean-up since *you* were a trainee."

Harry stopped walking, and then had to jog several steps to catch up to Malfoy again. "What?"

"I mean, they rarely trust me with anything else," Malfoy said, then turned to Harry and flashed a sudden, vicious smile. "I do hope you weren't terribly attached to all the exciting cases you've gotten, because you won't be getting any of them now that you're partnered with me. My cases are exclusively MLEP overflow. And by overflow, I mean I get the ones even the Patrols think are a waste of time."

Harry frowned at him. "But that doesn't make any sense."

"Still just as dense as ever, aren't you, Potter. Allow me to enlighten you," Malfoy snarled. He yanked Harry to a stop. "I could work here until I'm one hundred and fifty, and they'll still only see a Death Eater. I'm not trusted with anything more complicated than clean-up because they Don't. Trust. *Me*. In fact, I consider myself lucky they hired me at all." He started walking again.

Harry jogged another few steps to catch up. "But you're an Auror. They can't just—"

"Obviously, they can," Malfoy said sourly.

"But—"

"It doesn't bloody well matter, Potter, I'm still a Death Eater." Malfoy spat the words and scowled at the floor ahead of him. He looked suddenly uncomfortable with the line of conversation, even though he was the one who'd brought it up. "I picked the wrong side and now I'm living with the consequences. There's nothing to be done for it."

Harry watched him carefully for a moment. "I was at your trial, you know," he said quietly. "You were a child. They were your parents. You didn't have a choice."

Malfoy laughed, a bitter and ugly sound. "We always have a choice, Potter. I chose to stand with my family. Can we please not talk about this anymore?"

"All right, Malfoy," Harry said, risking a glance at his face. Malfoy looked cold, his profile set in sharp, angry lines. Something in Harry wanted to reach out and smooth those lines away. "Just... It wasn't much of a choice, was it? And I don't blame you for it. I never did, really."

Malfoy flinched away as if Harry had pelted him with stones instead of offered a few kind words. "Ah, forgiveness from the Savior himself. At last, I shall be able to sleep easily," he sneered. "Unfortunately, the rest of the world disagrees. Come along, we're almost at the MAP."

The Ministry's Apparition Point was still quite a distance away, but Harry didn't argue. Malfoy obviously wanted the conversation to be over, and Harry could use a little time to think. He'd been assigned to Malfoy to watch him and determine whether he was a murderer. Yet less than ten minutes into his new assignment, here he was, trying to defend Malfoy. To *himself*, of all people.

This was ridiculous. Malfoy had always been able to get to him, get under his skin in a way that no one else ever had. He'd been stupid to think that eight years from Hogwarts could

possibly have changed that. Well, he'd just have to keep that in mind and do his best to stay objective. Just do the job, prove Malfoy guilty or prove him innocent, then move on with his life.

Right.

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Draco kept his mouth compressed into a firm, thin line the rest of the way to the Apparition Point as if that could keep any other foolishness from escaping. He knew Potter kept sneaking concerned little glances at him, but Draco didn't give him the satisfaction of eye contact and walked a little faster. Contrary to what he'd told Potter, the MAP—a small room where the Ministry's wards were set to allow Apparition in and out—was still some distance away. Potter, surprisingly, had been polite enough to not point that out.

In his head, he could still hear the echoes of Potter's voice, his kind tone, almost as if he believed with that undying conviction he applied to everything he did that Draco really did deserve to have his past mistakes left in the past. But he could also hear his own voice spitting the two words that represented a damnation, a life sentence that no one could crawl out from beneath: Death Eater. He'd allowed himself to be branded as such, and that was how the rest of the world saw him. Nothing to be done for it now, other than sweep up the pieces and move along as best he could with the rest of the world still thinking the worst.

Except Potter, evidently. But then, this was the Boy Who Lived, befriender of Weasels and mudbloods and half-giants and rabid hippogriffs. What was one more lost cause in the grand scheme of things?

Still, a part of Draco felt vaguely pleased at the way things were going. A very very small part to be sure, and buried deep underneath the great pile of seething resentment he felt at being forced to take shelter beneath Saint Potter's wing. There was something nice, something familiar about Potter. As if just being near him meant that everything would turn out all right. And the way he talked to him, Merlin, Draco didn't deserve him to be so civil, not when he'd done nothing but sneer at him and try to get him reassigned and flaunt the fact that Potter would only get MLEP cast-off cases from here on out. Not a terribly great start to their partnership.

Yet Harry still looked at him like an equal, spoke to him like an equal. Like he saw Draco as neither the silly pureblood prat he'd been at Hogwarts, nor the evil Death Eater he'd been branded by the media. It was nice to have someone treat him like the Auror he'd grown up to be, for a change.

Draco clamped down on that train of thought before it could continue. He already had this stupid physical attraction to Potter. No need to encourage it.

They finally made it to the Apparition Point.

"Do you know where we're going?" Potter asked.

"Of course I know where we're going. I read the bloody file," Draco snapped.

"Oh. Good. Side-Along, then?" He held out his arm to Draco.

Draco hesitated. He'd never had an issue Side-Along Apparating with partners before. But this was Potter. And Draco really, really didn't want to touch him. "I'm sure you can figure it out," he snarled, slapping the file against Potter's chest. And he turned on his heel and was gone.

He appeared just inside a Muggle coffeeshop. Other uniformed Aurors blocked the entrance, and the place was packed with Muggles. Confused or angry or frightened by being held up, or the duel that they'd just witnessed, they complained loudly amongst themselves. Draco debated casting something to quiet the room, but decided to save his strength. Fucking hell, he'd need it for this.

"You're here for clean-up?" someone called from behind him.

Draco turned to see a tall, gangly Patrolman a little younger than himself approach. He couldn't put a name to him, but the face looked familiar enough, and friendly besides. That was something of a rarity.

"Oh, Malfoy," the Patrolman said, and now Draco felt vaguely guilty he didn't remember his name. "Thank god they sent you for this one, I was beginning to worry they'd just send..." The boy broke off as he caught sight of Potter suddenly popping into existence at Draco's elbow. "You..."

"My new partner," Draco snapped and looked pointedly around the crowded shop. "Where are we going to be working?"

The boy glanced back at Potter a few times, his mouth working open and shut, and Draco could practically see the struggle. Say something about Potter and risk Draco's legendary ire, or keep on Draco's good side and ignore the Golden Boy. He fixed his eyes on Draco and gestured to a narrow doorway at the far end of the counter. Smart lad, then.

Draco spared him a curt nod and strode to the doorway. Inside, he found a cramped storeroom. A bit dusty and dim, but it would suit his purposes well enough. Harry followed him in and slumped over onto a stack of empty milk crates, looking bored and grumpy. Normally this would cheer Draco, but now it did nothing. Mentally, he'd already set aside everything that didn't have to do with the task at hand. The door opened and a young man in an expensive suit walked in.

"What's going on? I demand—"

"Obliviate!"

The spell hit the man so hard he stumbled back, blinked fuzzily a few times, then smiled blankly.

"Potter, what the fuck?" Draco burst out.

"I'm *cleaning up*. Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing? Erasing memories of a duel?" Potter sounded sulky.

"Not like that," Draco told him with a glare. The man wandered back out, and a petite woman was ushered inside. Draco forced a pleasant smile and put his back to Potter. "Hello, what's your name?"

"Maggie," the woman answered, blinking around. "What's going on?"

"Oh, just a routine follow-up. I understand you saw some interesting things."

She nodded warily. "Yes..." She paused as Draco raised his wand. "What are you..." Maggie trailed off, her eyes growing glassy.

"You were never here," Draco said in his most soothing tone. "You left work a bit early. Pleasant afternoon, warm sunshine. You should go to the park this evening, the evening will be nice. You stopped at that little cafe on the way home, talked to the waiter you like so much. Handsome fellow, you think he might be interested. Perhaps you'll stop in tomorrow to see him again."

Maggie smiled. "Of course, that sounds lovely. I should be going now, I really shouldn't waste this lovely weather, yeah?"

"Of course not," Draco said gently. "Go on, then."

She walked out of the room, and Potter sucked in a breath between his teeth. "That's illegal."

Draco didn't spare him so much as a glance as the next Muggle came in. Slouching, sulky, and teenaged. Merlin, had he ever looked like that, so angry with everything and still too young to know what anger truly was? He hoped not, but rather suspected that he had.

"So you gonna tell me what's going on?"

"Oh, absolutely," Draco said easily, and pushed his mind out again as he raised his wand.

"What…" The kid trailed off.

"You went straight home from school, missed the bus again and had to walk." Again, Draco kept his voice low and even. "It was for the best, it gave you some time to think. That fight you had with your mum this morning, you may have overreacted a bit. There will be other parties you can go to, but you only ever get one mum, and she's really not so bad. And you'll be going off to University next year. She may nag you, but that's what mums do. She loves you. Don't stay angry with her."

The young man nodded slowly, still dazed. "Kate's parties always suck, anyhow," he muttered and slunk out the door.

Before the next Muggle could enter, Potter stuck his head out the doorway and told the Patrolman outside to wait a moment. He slammed the door shut and turned on Draco.

"I can't watch you do this!”

Draco scowled at him. "Watch me do *what* exactly?"

"This!" Potter said, waving his hand at the dingy little storeroom.

Draco clenched his teeth together in a futile effort to keep his temper. "We've got a job to do and I am doing it,” he ground out.

"Illegally!" Potter burst out, then shoved a hand through his hair. He didn't do it any favors; it stood up more wildly than it had before. "You're fucking with their minds!"

"I am using the slightest bit of Legilimency to come up with a believable story to replace the memory I wipe." Draco hated the way his voice sounded, all prim and defensive. In that moment, he hated Potter for making him sound like that. He hadn't hated anyone like this in a very long time, and he hated Potter all the more for bringing it back now. "I assure you it's perfectly safe."

"Perfectly safe?” Potter repeated like he didn’t believe Draco at all. “You're—"

"I'm doing my bloody job!" Draco broke in. "And yes, I am aware that it’s not quite legal. And no, I do not care, and neither do the Patrolmen out there because I am bloody good at what I do. It's better than the alternative, although you'd obviously rather just blast them all with Obliviate and let them stumble back out into the great wide world. That first bloke is likely still wandering about feeling like he's got his head stuck up his bum, and I can only imagine the headache he'll have recovering from it tomorrow. My way is painless and leaves them without a great gap of missing memory they suddenly need to account for."

"And making them do things? That's better too?" Potter's eyes were glowing with that angry spark they used to get back in Hogwarts. Draco felt his blood rise in response, just the way it always did.

"Oh, is that what this is about. Worried I'm modifying too much? Playing God?” His hands balled into fists. “I'm not telling them to do a damn thing they don't already want to do. And it's not as if I'm forcing them under Imperius. Just giving a little nudge. Half of them will talk themselves out of it again five minutes from now, anyhow. And if they don't, it's not as if I'm telling them to commit arson or go jump into the Thames. What do they get? Finally working up the courage to flirt with that bloke they like? A rare evening where they don't pick a fight with their mum? Tell me, what am I hurting?" His voice was rising and he didn’t care to stop it.

"So you're doing this from the goodness of your heart? I thought you didn't even care about Muggles."

The way Potter sneered at him lit his mounting irritation into something hard and hot, and Draco felt the last shreds of control deep inside him snap. "I don't care about Muggles, I care

about my stupid bloody job!" he shouted. "I suppose that doesn't matter to you, not to the Great Harry Potter or any of the other Aurors who come in to do this and are more concerned with doing it quickly than doing it right, because they consider this *beneath* them. This is only *clean-up duty* after all, but it's all that I've got and I'm going to do the best I can at it and then maybe someone will finally fucking notice how much I've—" Draco bit off his words and felt his vulnerability yawn out between them like a chasm. Potter was staring at him, his eyes wide and startled and so very green. Draco let out one shaky breath and drew in another. "This is how I work, Potter," he said. That overly-formal, defensive tone was back, and this time Draco clung to it. "And if you don't like it then you can kindly fuck off."

He turned his back on him, opened the door, and leaned out. The Patrolman just outside, the same young one he'd dealt with earlier (Patrolman Winters, Draco's brain suddenly supplied) was doing his best to act like he hadn't heard anything but the dark flush that crept up his cheeks and the nervous way he slid his gaze over Draco gave him away. Still, Draco appreciated the effort and he nodded once.

"If you'd please send in the next witness…?"

Winters nodded back. "Yes, sir."

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Three and a half hours later, the last Muggle walked back out of the storeroom. Grateful, Harry stood and tried to stretch some of the knots from his back. Half the afternoon spent perched atop a stack of empty milk crates certainly hadn't done him any favors. As much complaining as his back and, yes, his arse were doing right now, he had to be feeling worlds better than Malfoy. Nearly an hour ago, Malfoy had begun gritting his teeth. Thirty minutes more and one hand kept sneaking up to rub at his temple. Now he looked washed out and exhausted and a little bit ill. He moved carefully, placing each foot in small, precise steps as he walked out of the storeroom and into the coffeeshop.

Harry felt a small twinge of guilt as he followed. Malfoy wouldn't be in such bad shape if his partner had done a fair share of the work. But for the first hour Harry had been more concerned with making a point than with pulling his weight. Then by the time he finally got himself around to offering to help near hour two, Malfoy had given him such a vicious glare that he'd kept his mouth shut for the rest of the session.

Malfoy gingerly made his way to the door, pausing to clap a hand to the shoulder of the young Patrolman who stood beside it on guard, and the boy nodded in return. "Thank you, Winters," Malfoy said roughly, and continued onto the street.

"Look, um, Malfoy," Harry started, then stopped, awkward, when Malfoy turned his head and squinted at him. He forged ahead. "It's nearly five. Maybe you should just head home from here. You look rather… um."

Malfoy's laugh came out as more of a croak. "I look 'rather, um'? Don't sweeten the truth on my account. I look awful, and I can assure you I feel worse. I just need to get back to my office. I have some potions there that'll help me."

"Does this happen often, then?" Harry asked

"More often than I'd like. But it's worth it, doing a proper job of it." He stared at Harry as if expecting a challenge.

"Right. Er, Side-Along back to the Ministry?" Harry offered his arm. "You look like you could use a lift."

Malfoy hesitated, and Harry could see the indecision on his face. But his exhaustion won out and he looped his arm firmly through Harry's. He smelled good, Harry noticed after Malfoy had stepped close, the smell of a spicy and likely expensive aftershave mingling with the subtler scent of his shampoo. He realized he was standing there, *smelling Malfoy* of all the ridiculous things, and turned abruptly on his heel while thinking of the Ministry. Too abruptly, given Malfoy's state. As they appeared back at the MAP, Malfoy stumbled and nearly went down. Harry's arms went around him without thinking. His nose bumped the crown of Malfoy's head and he got a lungful of that shampoo smell. It smelled sharply of apples and made his mouth water.

Harry jumped back, again too quickly as Malfoy nearly lost his balance again.

"I… Sorry, I just—"

Malfoy cut him off with a raised hand. "Please, don't talk."

They made their way, slow and careful and silent, back to Malfoy's office. Harry lingered in the doorway as Malfoy stumbled to one of the trunks and dug through it. He made a little triumphant 'Ah-ha!' noise as he came back up with a vial of bright yellow liquid. He carefully popped the cork free and downed it in one gulp. Harry definitely didn't stare at the way Malfoy's throat worked as he swallowed.

"Hm. Much better." Malfoy recorked the vial and tucked it back into the trunk.

He certainly looked much better, all traces of tiredness and pain gone. "What was in that?" Harry asked.

"My own brew," Malfoy replied. He sounded proud. "Based on a variant of Pepper-Up, but with a good dose of pain blocker for the headache, and just a light calming drought because fuck if I don't also need to feel calmer any time I need a dose of it."

"Oh. You still work with potions?" Harry asked, because he felt like he should say something.

"A bit," Malfoy said. "I dabble some."

"Oh," Harry said again. "I always thought you'd end up becoming a Master."

“Obviously I didn’t.”

And there it was, what Harry was afraid of. Now that they didn’t have Malfoy’s pain between them, the silence was awkward and the longer it stretched on the more difficult it became to break it. Malfoy shifted slightly where he stood, his gaze passing over the mostly-packed trunks that cluttered his office.

Harry cleared his throat. “Mine’s bigger,” he blurted out.

Malfoy’s head whipped around to face him and he made a small choking noise. “What?”

Harry felt his face flame as he realized the implications what he’d just said. “My office,” he clarified and turned his back to Malfoy under the guise of closing a trunk lid. “If we’re partners, we’re going to be sharing, right? And my office is bigger than yours. And you’re already mostly packed up, so…”

“It makes sense for me to move there. Right. I’ll just finish up here, then, and meet you there?” He sounded flustered.

Harry nodded. His face hadn’t cooled and he didn’t dare turn back to face his new partner. “Sounds good. I’ll just go up to mine and make sure Heppner’s cleared all his things out.” Harry couldn’t imagine that he hadn’t, not after being Body-Bound and left behind, but it was an excuse to escape until his face wasn’t quite so pink. And so he took it, and fled.

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“Mine’s bigger.”

The words replayed in Draco’s head as he stacked the last of his files and piled them into a trunk. Potter certainly hadn’t meant for it to come out quite like that, if the dark flush that swept up his face and down his neck had been any indication. And, *really*, it wasn’t as if Potter made a habit of going around bragging about his cock. But for a second there, one heart-stopping second, Draco *had* thought that Potter *was* bragging about his cock, and then he’d turned and seen the mortification writ plain on Potter’s face and he’d immediately felt the fool for assuming, even for one heart-stopping second, that Potter had been referring to his pride and joy.

Although in his defense, he had had several wank fantasies over the years that started out with those words, albeit rarely someone other than him speaking that line and never starring Potter. Well, except for that one in the showers in the Quidditch locker room after a game, where Potter just happened to glance over at Draco and then Draco set about proving that size wasn’t everything, not that *his* wasn’t a perfectly respectable size, thankyouverymuch, it was just that Potter had edged him out in everything else in his life so far, so why shouldn’t it stand to reason that Potter’s cock would too?

Merlin. He had to stop thinking about Potter's cock. He had to stop thinking about cocks in general. He had to stop even thinking the word cock. Cock, cock, cock.

Fuck.

Draco growled and slammed the last of his files into the trunk. He'd just blame this ridiculousness on exhaustion from three hours of delicate magic, and the fact that his nerves were still raw from the news of Parsons' death, and the fact that his new partner was Harry bloody Potter. Whose cock was probably bigger than Draco's.

Fuck fuck *fuck*.

The headache that had faded with the use of his potion threatened to return, and though Draco knew he would regret it at three this morning when he wasn't able to sleep, he rummaged through his belongings until he found another vial. Rather than swallowing this one quickly, he took a slow sip. It tasted faintly of bananas and, inexplicably, sunshine. A soothing warmth radiated from his esophagus down through his chest, and he felt muscles throughout his neck and shoulders that he hadn't realized were clenched tight suddenly loosen and relax. He breathed in and out slowly, and was able to avoid thinking about Potter and cocks and Potter's cock in particular for almost half a minute.

Close enough.

Draco shrank down the trunks and tucked them away into his black work satchel. He slung it over his shoulder and took a last look round his empty office. Former office, that is. He hadn't been here long, but he'd settled in. It hadn't been easy at first, Parsons and he had both seen to that. Two people who were too damn stubborn for their own good. But in time they'd settled with each other. In time, as his files multiplied on the shelves and he'd put pictures on the walls, Parsons grew on him. He'd begun to open up to her a little about his past, about his family and his role in the War. She'd talked a bit about her bastard of an ex-husband and the daughter she hardly ever saw. They'd quit dancing in circles around each other and fallen into step side by side. They'd worked well together. And now she was gone.

Draco's chest tightened, but the calming effects of two doses of potion won out and he could breathe. For the first time, he let himself remember. They hadn't been particularly close, even at the end. Not like the partnerships other Aurors formed, deeper and more complicated even than some marriages. He'd come to trust her to do her job, as she trusted him to do his. She was a good witch, and he respected that.

This was the last place he'd seen her, right here in this room, just behind her desk as she'd stood and stretched and gathered her things together at ten to five.

"Hot date tonight?" he'd quipped dryly with a pointed glance at the clock.

"Yeah," Parsons had shot back, flipping him two fingers. "With these right here."

"Ugh," he'd said. "That's disgusting, don't be crude."

She'd laughed, that full deep laugh that came up from her belly and made her eyes sparkle. He'd always liked her laugh, even before he'd liked her. "Too easy to get to you prissy pureblood types. C'mon, Malfoy, it's Friday. What say you knock off early tonight, get an early start to enjoying your weekend. You've been chin-deep in papers all week, you deserve a little break."

He'd only shaken his head. "I'm nearly done here, I won't be long." He didn't know why she'd asked; she knew how he liked to get everything in order at the end of the week to start next Monday fresh.

"Suit yourself," she'd replied, then paused in the doorway. "Only, some of us were talking about heading down to the White Hart for a pint or two. Thought maybe you might want to come along?"

He'd paused at that. Parsons had never invited him out with her before. No one had invited him out with them before. But in the end he'd shaken his head again. "No thanks." He'd dug into a pocket and pulled out a sickle. He'd flipped it to her, and she caught it neatly. "Buy your date a drink for me, though, yeah?"

She'd looked at him, confused. He'd waggled his fingers at her, and she tipped her head back and laughed that full, deep laugh again. He'd smiled in return.

"Right, then. Night, Malfoy." And she walked through the doorway and was gone from his life.

He'd still been here three hours later when they'd come into his office and told him that Parsons had been found dead in an alley a few blocks from her intended pub. She'd never arrived. If he'd taken her up on her offer, knocked off early and gone out for a drink or two, if he'd escorted her to the pub, if only—

No, that way was the path to madness, he knew. Merlin knew he'd spent enough time second-guessing himself in his youth. What if he'd been smarter, quicker, stronger. Maybe if Potter had taken his hand that first day, if he'd made a better first impression, maybe, maybe, maybe. He had no time for what-ifs and maybes in his life anymore. Here, he'd made an innocent choice, what had followed had not been his fault.

Draco drew in a long steady breath and released it. He let the calming effects of the potion sweep over him again. He patted the trunks in his bag and turned away. In the doorway he hesitated, then turned back to let his gaze wander the empty shelves, the bare desks.

"Goodbye, Penelope," he whispered, then put his back to his past and strode off to face his future.

His future, he saw as he entered his new office, was currently trying to shove what appeared to be a half-eaten sandwich into an already-overflowing rubbish bin.

"You're right," he couldn't resist saying. "Yours really is bigger."

Oh fuck, there he went with the cocks again, but it really was worth it for the way that Potter's head snapped around and how his eyes got wide and round as he tried to figure out whether Draco was serious or taking the piss or, heaven forbid, flirting. Draco didn't help him, only kept his face perfectly impassive.

"Er, I told you it was," he managed to get out eventually.

Potter's cheeks were turning pink again and Draco didn't think he could keep his face straight any longer. He turned and set his trunks on the floor beside his new desk and cancelled the Shrinking Charms them. When he turned back to survey the rest of his new office, Potter appeared to have gotten himself back under control. Shame, that. Draco had always liked forcing Potter off-balance and flustered.

"So," he said, tucking his hands into his pockets and letting his gaze sweep over Potter's side of things. "This is it."

"Yeah." Potter ran a hand through his hair. "I tried to tidy up a bit."

"Really. I couldn't tell."

Potter's half of the office was messy, to say the least. The shelves were crammed with teetering piles of paper that looked ready to avalanche down on anyone unsuspecting enough to brush against them. The top of Potter's desk was entirely buried beneath more paper and files and quills and stoppered inkpots and no less than half a dozen used teacups, and that was just what Draco could see from the doorway. There was a small sofa against the wall just opposite the door, between their opposing desks. At least Draco assumed there was a sofa underneath the discarded clothing and empty takeaway bags heaped on top of it in a jumbled mess. Draco stepped forward and edged a pair of dirty trainers back onto Potter's side of the room, noting with faint horror that there appeared to be a stale scone tucked neatly inside the left one. He didn't ask; he didn't want to know.

The first thing he'd do before he unpacked was get rid of all this mess. He didn't think that he could work if he was forced to look at all this *stuff*. It made him feel anxious.

"I'm working on it," Potter muttered.

At first Draco thought Potter had read his thoughts, but then he realized that the distasteful expression he currently wore said it all. "Right. Well—"

Draco was cut off by the door banging open. Without a knock or pause for an invitation to be issued, he noted as Weasley came barging in like an errant hippogriff. Clearly, the common courtesy of knocking before coming in wasn't something Gryffindors were at all familiar with.

"Harry, there you are. Rough luck, mate. I heard about all the uproar with Heppner and then this with—Malfoy." He broke off as he finally noticed that he and Potter weren't alone.

For a long moment, he and Weasley stared at each other. Weasley hadn't changed much from Hogwarts either, though he appeared to have gotten even taller, if that was possible. Still

ginger and freckled and lanky. At least he'd finally quit wearing hand-me-downs. Weasley's Auror robes were in perfect condition, even though the crisp carmine color clashed horribly with his complexion.

Potter, meanwhile, stood gaping uselessly between the two of them. Merlin's beard, if someone didn't do something they'd be here all night and Draco had quite a lot to get done. He put out his hand.

"Weasley," he said evenly in greeting.

Weasley, to his credit, just replied, "Malfoy," and pressed his hand just long enough to be considered polite. He turned his attention back to Potter. "Anyhow, Harry. I heard you had a rough day, what with that business with Heppner. And I heard you got stuck with clean-up on a settled case?" He shook his head at the great injustice of the Savior wasting a day caught up in the details of a case when clearly Potter ought to be off chasing down wicked wizards and rescuing puppies or whatever else it was that he usually did around here. "Hermione's working late tonight, thought you might be interested in some takeaway curry and a pint at my place?"

"Yeah," Potter said, brightening more than he had in Draco's presence all day. "Sounds great." He took a few steps toward the door, then glanced back to Draco as if he'd just remembered his partner still standing there. "Um. That is, unless you want me to help you get settled here?"

Draco put on his best horrified face. "You want to make my half of the office look like *that*?" he demanded, and flung a hand at the wreckage that encompassed Potter's side of the room. "I think not!"

Potter rolled his eyes. "Fine. Whatever. I was just trying to be nice." He pushed past Weasley.

"To be fair, it is a bit of a mess, mate," Draco heard Weasley saying from the hallway as he followed Potter out.

"Shut up, you…" The rest of Potter's reply cut off as the door shut and the silencing charms activated.

Draco sighed and looked around. Well, best get to work, then. He had a lot to do. But first he thought he might stop by the break room for a nice bracing cuppa before he got to work on settling in. Plan in place, Draco firmly set Potter from his mind and got on with his night.

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It was a truly marvelous thing to have a friend who knew what he needed before Harry even knew himself. He leaned forward and put his empty container on the coffee table next to the

empty dish that Ron had abandoned there nearly five minutes earlier. Spicy takeaway curry and a pint of beer had done wonders for easing away the day's stresses.

"*Now* can we talk about it?" Ron asked, both exasperated and eager. "I've been hearing the rumors flying around all day, I'd love to know the truth." He'd asked Harry about it earlier, but Harry had put him off, unable to deal with it on an empty stomach.

Rather than answer, Harry tipped his pint glass back and swallowed down the last inch of beer that had slowly warmed in the bottom. "Get me another? Can't talk with a dry mouth."

Ron rolled his eyes and collected his own empty pint glass to take to the kitchen for a refill. Harry leaned back on the sofa and let out a sigh. Ron and Hermione's flat was just as comfortable to him as his own place, but the squashy leather sofa and matching chairs and thick rugs and dark wood fireplace reminded him a little of Hogwarts. He'd pointed out the similarities to Hermione once, and she'd just smiled and so he assumed she'd done that deliberately. Ron returned with the newly filled pint glasses. He handed one of them off to Harry before taking a pull from the other one as he sat. He smacked the foam from his lips and waved his hand in a little 'after you' sort of gesture.

So Harry took a sip of his own beer and set into recounting the story of the weekend's pursuit and Heppner and how he'd eventually Stunned Heppner for being a twat and got on with the chase by himself. When he got to the part of describing his conversation with Kingsley and how he'd been assigned to gather evidence against Malfoy, Ron interrupted.

"Wait, so Shacklebolt thinks he did it?" Ron asked with a frown.

"Apparently," Harry said with a shrug and went on describing breaking the news to Malfoy and then their first assignment. When he told Ron about Malfoy's use of Legilimency on the Muggles, Ron interrupted again.

"That's illegal."

"That's what I told him," Harry sighed, and related the argument they'd had, then wrapped up with going back to the Ministry and moving Malfoy into his office. He left out the bit about how awkwardly he'd gone about telling Malfoy that he had the larger office, or how Malfoy agreed that it was bigger when he'd come in. Harry still couldn't tell what exactly Malfoy had meant by that. Bastard had one hell of a poker face, Harry had to give him that. For one crazy moment Harry had thought that Malfoy was actually flirting with him, but in the end he just assumed Malfoy was making fun of him. At least that was familiar enough.

He waited expectantly, for Ron to say something, the silence stretching on.

"Well?" he asked finally, impatience winning out.

Ron picked up his glass again, took a long swallow, and set it back on the coffee table. "I'm sorry, I'm still stuck on the bit where Kingsley thinks Malfoy's a murderer but is keeping him around."

“He’s afraid that Malfoy will run if he’s cut loose.” Harry sighed and took another gulp of his beer. “He needs evidence to arrest him, and in the meantime he wants Malfoy where he can keep an eye on him. Or, where I can keep an eye on him, I guess.”

“So he’s partnered you with him? Bloody hell, Harry, I know you’re supposed to be the Boy Who Lived and all…” Ron trailed off and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do you think he’s guilty?”

“No,” Harry said without thinking, then again, stronger. “No.” He thought of Malfoy on the Astronomy Tower all those years ago, lowering his wand. “He’s not a murderer. He doesn’t have it in him.” He cast a sidelong glance at Ron. “Do you?”

“I don’t know, I honestly don’t. I think probably he’s capable of it, given the right motivations. But I also don’t think he’s stupid enough to start murdering his partners without setting up a solid alibi first. And certainly not four times,” Ron said.

“I don’t think he’d murder his partners at all,” Harry said. “He really cares about his job. He knows how people look at him and see nothing but a Death Eater—“

“And that’s another thing that makes me suspicious,” Ron broke in. “Don’t you think it’s odd that Malfoy would be opening up to you of all people about that? You know how Slytherins are. They don’t do anything without a reason.”

Harry flopped back against the cushions and kicked his feet up on the coffee table since Hermione wasn’t around to tell him otherwise. “It’s been a long time since Hogwarts, mate. I think we can leave House differences in the past,” he said. “And he did have a reason. He only said all that stuff about being a Death Eater and not being trusted to throw it in my face that I wouldn’t get any exciting cases as his partner. And the bit later about taking his job seriously, well, that was my fault. Looks like I’m still able to push his buttons as easily as ever. He was angry and wasn’t thinking, and as soon as he realized what he was saying he shut his mouth.”

Ron sighed. “What if he’s only showing you what he wants you to see? Hey, now,” he said as Harry opened his mouth to object. “You need to consider all the angles here. All I’m saying is you need to keep your eyes open on this one. On the one hand, I get it, it’s just Malfoy. He’s always been snotty and obnoxious, but mostly harmless. And on the other, four of his partners are now dead. Something is clearly going on, and Shacklebolt thinks he’s guilty, and —“

“All right, all right, I get it. Constant vigilance,” Harry grumbled. A few seconds of silence ticked by.

“So you really don’t think he did it?” Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. “No, I really don’t.”

Ron watched him carefully for a few moments, blue eyes alight with concern. “Are you willing to bet your life on that?”

Harry gave his friend a wry smile and reached for his beer. “I don’t exactly have much of a choice, do I? He’s my partner now.” He sighed and took a sip of his drink. “But I’ll keep my eyes open, and I’ll be careful.”

Chapter 2

Draco slid the last stack of files onto the shelves and took a step back to admire his work. He still had a bit left to do as far as organization went, but for now he thought that arranging the case files by date would be enough for a first pass. Merlin knew how Potter could even find anything in that wreckage. Maybe part of being the Boy Who Lived involved possessing an uncanny ability to find whatever he needed when he needed it. Idly, Draco pictured Potter closing his eyes and plunging his hand into a stack of file folders and parchments, rooting around for a moment before yanking one file free with a shouted, 'Ah-ha!' At least he'd get more use out of a talent like that than his lauded ability to eliminate Dark Lords. That, at least, seemed to have been a one-time thing.

Well, uncanny finding-things power or not, Draco couldn't concentrate properly if he had to work in an untidy environment, so Potter would simply have to learn to deal with it and find his files like a normal person, from a shelf where they were organized by date and cross-referenced by… Well. Draco hadn't had time to get to the cross-referencing tonight. He was sure he'd get to it later.

Draco sighed and stretched his arms over his head briefly, trying to ease some of the tension from his spine, then dropped his arms and hunched his shoulders forward, still stretching, and something in his back gave a wonderfully satisfying click. He took a moment to straighten his clothing, an ivory button-up shirt paired with a light green waistcoat and matching tie today, then slid into his heavy red Auror robes and did up the buttons as he glanced at the clock. Just past seven. Draco sighed again. He knew that second potion had been a bad idea, but at least he'd gotten the room completely finished overnight when he found himself entirely unable to sleep.

And now he thought he had just enough time to go home, shower and change, and still have time to stop by the breakroom for his morning cup of tea before Potter got in. Draco didn't think he could handle Potter on no sleep if he wasn't armed with a cup of tea, at the very least. Plan in place, Draco cast one last look around the room and stepped out into the hall.

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Harry's conversation with Ron was still rattling around in his head when he went into work on Tuesday morning. As he rode the lift down to his floor, he replayed the argument he'd had with Malfoy in the coffee shop the day before. Ron had suspected Malfoy of manipulating him, but as Harry thought over it again he just wasn't convinced. Malfoy was calculating, yeah, but he wasn't that great of an actor. Sure, he had that freaky ability to smooth his features into a perfectly expressionless mask, but there was a difference between hiding his emotions and projecting false ones outward. The flashing anger in his eyes, the seething bitter

resentment that made his voice tremble as he shouted… Harry just didn't think those things could be faked.

The ding of the lift arriving at his floor snapped Harry out of his musings. He squeezed between a pair of gossiping wizards and strode down the hallway. This would be his first full day with Malfoy as his partner, and he found himself eager to get started. He opened the door to his office and started to go inside, but stopped short. Frowning, he stepped back out, checked that the nameplate on the door really did read 'H. J. Potter, Auror' and slowly walked back in again.

"What the bloody hell."

All of the piled-up parchment had vanished from his desk and, from the look of it, migrated to the shelves where it joined the rest of his files in neat rows and stacks that mirrored the files on the shelving around his new partner's desk. The empty takeaway bags and foil containers had vanished altogether, as had the collection of empty teacups and that orange that he'd been holding onto out of a vague curiosity to see how many more colors it could turn. All of the clothing he'd shed and tossed carelessly onto the couch had been neatly folded and stacked in a pile behind his desk. Harry dropped down into his chair. He could actually see his blotter, which hadn't happened since the day he'd moved in here. Two trays, marked 'Inbox' and 'Outbox' in a precise, looping handwriting sat to his left, while his inkpot and quills sat to his right. Ron and Hermione on their wedding day waved out from a silver picture frame that Harry had quite frankly forgotten even existed. He reached out one hand to touch the glass. It had been even been dusted, as had the shade of the lamp it sat just below. He ran a gentle fingertip along the edge of his lampshade, impressed by how thorough Malfoy had been.

He stood and wandered to Malfoy's side of the room. He'd evidently managed to get his own things squared away as well. All of his own files now filled his half of the shelving, and his desk was arranged exactly as Harry's was, right down to the placement of a picture frame just below the lamp. Idly, Harry picked it up to get a look at it, expecting a photo of parents or friends or maybe a girlfriend. He didn't expect the newspaper clipping.

DEATH EATER TRIALS BEGIN, proclaimed the headline in a blaring sort of font, just above a slightly grainy photo from the courtroom. As Harry watched, the tall doors banged open and scowling Aurors escorted Lucius inside, looking resigned with his head bowed and eyes on the floor. Narcissa followed, with her chin up and her eyes gleaming with unshed tears. Malfoy came last, looking small and young and sick with fear. They were marched up the narrow aisle between endless rows of hard and angry faces, disappearing from the frame for a few seconds before the picture looped and the doors banged open and they were ushered in again.

Harry remembered that day, how fragile and afraid Malfoy had looked as the Wizengamot had read off his charges and deliberated about his fate, how he kept his chin tilted up at a haughty angle that was entirely at odds with the trembling twist of his mouth or the way he wrung his hands in his lap, or the dark circles beneath his eyes. Harry couldn't help feeling sorry for him, and at that point he'd decided that they'd both been through far too much to keep up their ridiculously juvenile rivalry. He'd kept his promise on the first day of training

when Malfoy had stalked into the room, chin held high but with those same dark circles under his eyes, and Harry had gone right up to him and they'd agreed to let the past stay there. Lost in his thoughts, Harry watched Malfoy get marched up the aisle again and again.

The door opened, and Harry turned to see Malfoy walk into the room with a teacup and saucer balanced in one hand and a thin stack of folders tucked under his arm.

"You cleaned," he said ridiculously, instead of saying 'Good morning,' like a normal person. Harry sighed inwardly and waited for Malfoy to call him an idiot.

"It was either that or set fire to the whole mess," Malfoy replied, sitting down behind his desk. He sounded more cheerful than Harry thought he would, considering he'd apparently spent the night here, tidying up Harry's desk and sorting through Harry's files. "Cleaning won out by the narrowest of margins, I'll have you know."

"You even dusted my lampshade." Harry nearly bit his tongue because damn if *that* didn't sound like a euphemism for something inappropriate. Really, he should just stop talking.

Now Malfoy scowled at him, and that, at least, was more familiar. "Don't get used to it, Potter. I'm not a house-elf."

Harry shook his head. "Sorry, just. I can't believe you did this." He looked around his office again.

Malfoy sighed and sipped at his tea. He placed the cup back onto the saucer with a small clink. "The words you're looking for are 'thank you' and you're quite welcome but I didn't do it for you. That's the first thing you should know about me if we're to be partners. I can't abide a mess. Now, I've set you firmly on the path to organization, and it's up to you to stay on it or next time I really will set your desk on fire. I've sorted your case files strictly by date, I hope that's all right with you."

"That's fine, um, great," Harry said. His previous method of organization had involved a process not unlike an archaeological dig if he ever needed to find old case files. Malfoy's way really was better. "I guess we should get started on the paperwork from yesterday and then go pick up today's assignments then." He glanced at his Inbox to confirm that nothing urgent needed their attention, then took a moment to marvel at the fact that he *could* just glance at his Inbox to see if he'd been sent anything. Before, checking his Inbox required a little bit of shifting things around and a lot of blind groping.

"Done and done," Malfoy said and tapped the thin folders in front of him.

"You already did the paperwork?" Harry knew it was a stupid question from the way Malfoy's scowl darkened, but this was rather a lot to take in for one morning.

"That's what I said, didn't I? That's the second thing you should know about working with me, Potter. I do the paperwork. I have very exacting standards for paperwork and to be honest I don't think you'll be able to live up to them. Also, I became very well acquainted with your handwriting from sorting your files last night, and I use the word *handwriting* very loosely as

it applies to that scribbling you've covered all your papers with." He stared hard at Harry as if daring him to disagree, then added firmly, "Trust me, this is for the best."

Harry never had to do paperwork again and Malfoy was acting like Harry was the one doing him a favor by handing it over? His mind reeled. "Um, okay," he said.

Malfoy nodded. "Wonderful, then. Glad we got that cleared up. Now if you don't mind letting me have my picture back, we'll go over our cases for the day."

"Oh, right. Er. Sorry," Harry said, fumbling the picture frame back onto Malfoy's desk. "Sorry, I just. I wanted to see who it was."

"Well now you've seen," Malfoy said dryly, nudging it back into perfect position with one elegant forefinger.

"Why?" Harry asked without really meaning to. Once the word was out, he forced himself to continue. "Why would you put that where you have to see it every day?"

For a long moment he thought Malfoy wouldn't answer, but then he said softly, "To remind myself."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, but Malfoy saved him from having to answer. He clamped his lips together in a firm line as he picked up his handful of files and shook them in Harry's direction.

"Today's cases? It's already past nine, Potter, we're on the clock," he said briskly.

"All right, what have we got?" Harry asked. He plopped down on the sofa and winced as a loose spring poked at his backside. He shifted slightly to one side and encountered an uncomfortably lumpy part of the cushion. Ah, now he remembered why he'd let the bloody thing get buried in the first place.

Malfoy leaned back in his chair and flipped through the files. A lock of hair worked loose from the tail he'd tied it back in and fell into his face, and he tucked it behind one ear. "Well, we've got Mr. Wright, whose window was broken earlier this morning by, and I quote, 'that bloody band of hooligans that always hangs out around here, howling like a mob of savage Muggles.'" He paused and glanced up at Harry. "Have you ever encountered Mr. Wright?"

Harry shook his head.

"Oh, you're in for a treat," Malfoy said with a sly grin that made Harry a little uneasy. "Anyway, he wants the lot of them rounded up and arrested. Let's see what else we've got for today. Oh, Mrs. Dodson's shop has been broken into again, the poor dear, and she'd like someone to come round and take a report on what's been stolen. And Mrs. Levy's cat has been kidnapped. I suggest we start with that one." Malfoy rolled his eyes as he gasped dramatically, "A kidnapping, imagine! It sounds urgent, wouldn't you say? I wonder if they've left a ransom note."

"Wait," Harry said helplessly, his brain still trying to catch up. "Her *cat* has been kidnapped?"

“I told you to forget about the big exciting cases you’re used to getting,” Malfoy said, then paused to drain the last of his tea. He cast a quick cleaning charm on the cup and set it aside. “Although this isn’t so bad. Three cases in one day is rather busy, isn’t it? Partnering with the Boy Who Lived does seem to have some advantage after all.” He stood. “Come along, Potter. We’d best get started.”

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Mrs. Levy lived in a small white cottage with a spotlessly cultivated garden. She was waiting on her doorstep when Draco appeared with Potter at his elbow. He stepped away from Potter as quickly as he could and strode up the front walk.

“Oh, thank goodness you’ve come quickly!” she wailed. “My poor baby’s been kidnapped. It was Mr. Hedelson next door, he’s never liked my sweet little girl. I demand you go interrogate him right this instant!”

Potter was gaping at Mrs. Levy like she was entirely off her trolley, which, to be fair, was an opinion Draco shared. He stepped neatly in front of Potter, blocking him and his great gaping gob from view. Yes, Mrs. Levy might be barmy, but he was a *professional*.

“Do you have a photo of the, ah, victim?” Draco asked while Potter made a small choking sound behind him.

“Oh yes, of course. You’ll need that, won’t you? Right this way, please.”

Mrs. Levy led the way into her home, and for a moment Draco felt like he’d walked into Umbridge’s office. Everything in the living room was pink and white, and every available surface was loaded with pictures of the same fat tabby with variations of the same disgruntled expression on its fluffy little face.

“This is my little princess,” Mrs. Levy announced, waving an all-encompassing hand at the room.

Potter, meanwhile, was gawping at the décor in his typical I’m-about-as-subtle-as-Hagrid-in-a-teashop manner.

“Right.” Draco dug into his satchel and pulled out a small notebook and quill. “And what is the victim’s name?”

“Westminster Tabby,” Mrs. Levy said proudly. “She’s from a long and very esteemed pedigree—“

“Just the bare facts for now, please,” Draco said smoothly, cutting into her monologue as he diligently wrote on his notepad. “And how do you know Ms. Tabby has been kidnapped? Have you received a ransom note?”

Beside him, Potter made a gasping cough that sounded suspiciously like a botched attempt to smother a laugh. As discreetly as he could, Draco elbowed him in the ribs, scratched a few more words on his notepad and passed it off to Potter as Mrs. Levy explained that no, there was no note, and started harping on about the neighbor again. Potter cleared his throat once and passed the notebook back and Draco flipped it closed again, hiding the words 'If you can't control yourself then please do me the favor of removing yourself from the room,' from view.

"If you don't mind, my partner and I would like to take a look around and, ah, get a feel for the victim before we confront your neighbor."

"Please," Mrs. Levy said. "Be my guest."

Two minutes later, Westminster Tabby was discovered, sleeping soundly in her mistress' knitting basket, surrounded by soft skeins of grey wool.

"Well," Potter said once they were safely outside again. "That was…" He trailed off, apparently unable to find words for what they'd just been through.

"Yes," Draco agreed with a small sigh. "That was indeed." He sighed again and pulled the stack of case files out of his satchel and sorted through them. "Next up, Mr. Wright. Broken window, hooligans, wants them arrested." He tucked the files away again and offered his arm to Potter. "Side-Along with me? Merlin knows I've been there often enough that I know the way."

"All right," Potter said slowly and put his arm through Draco's.

Potter's hand was warm and his grip on Draco's elbow was strong. Draco did his best to ignore it as he closed his eyes and pictured Mr. Wright's quaint little home, and then came that horrid sucking sensation and a soft bang, and when he opened his eyes they had arrived. He shook Potter free and took out his notepad, flipping it to a fresh page before he strode up the winding brick path that led to the little brick house. He paused at the door for a moment to compose himself, then cleared his throat firmly and rang the bell.

The door jerked open before he even had a chance to lower his hand, and he found himself staring down at Mr. Wright. Beside him, Potter relaxed a fraction. Mr. Wright didn't seem that threatening, after all, being all of five foot nothing and on the far side of one hundred. He had a charmingly round bald head, rather like a house-elf, and large glasses that made him look a bit bug-eyed, and he shuffled along with the help of a cane. Draco dragged the soles of his shoes vigorously along the welcome mat, and Mr. Wright nodded his approval as he shuffled back a few steps to make room for Draco to come inside.

"Wipe your feet," Draco muttered to Potter as he crossed the threshold.

Potter gave his soles a cursory wipe, then made to come inside. *Whap!* Mr. Wright's cane connected with Potter's shins, and Potter yelped and hopped back, stumbling over the threshold and nearly falling onto his arse. Draco couldn't keep himself from smirking.

"Told you to wipe your feet."

The glare Potter sent him was spectacularly satisfying, and Draco's smile widened.

"What the hell is this?" Mr. Wright demanded, spoiling Draco's moment. "What happened to that nice well-mannered girl that you're tromping about with this oaf?"

"This oaf, Sir, is *Harry Potter*," Draco said, keeping his voice loud and even and slow, so he wouldn't be accused of mumbling. "You see, Sir, we at the Ministry take your complaints very seriously, so they've assigned the very famous *Harry Potter* to personally investigate your case." He fought to keep his mouth from curving into a smile as Potter's glare intensified.

"Harry Potter my arse. I don't care if he's the bloody Queen of England, he'll wipe his feet like a civilized person before he steps foot in my house!" Mr. Wright spat. "What were you, boy, raised in a bloody barn?"

"A cupboard, actually," Potter said dryly as he gave his shoes a more thorough wiping on the mat.

Draco grimaced. Potter's strange sense of humor wouldn't do him any favors here.

Sure enough, Mr. Wright brandished his cane, and Draco was wonderfully pleased to see Potter flinch back. "Don't get smart with me, boy!"

Potter sent Draco a panicked glance as Mr. Wright continued to shake his cane in Potter's direction as he nattered on about the ill manners of today's youth and how back in his day things were different. Draco very carefully inserted himself between Potter and Mr. Wright's cane.

"Sir, if you don't mind, I'd like to see the scene of the crime. So that we might catch the hooligans before they strike again."

It was only with the ease of long practice that he could say the word 'hooligans' with a straight face. Draco was faintly afraid that Potter would spoil the effects of his forced sincerity by snickering, as he had at Mrs. Levy's house, but luckily Potter seemed too disoriented to do anything but stand there like a slack jawed fool. Must not be every day that invoking the name of the Savior inspired a swat with a cane rather than the foolish fawning that Potter was likely accustomed to.

Mr. Wright, still droning on about 'lack of manners' and 'when I was a lad,' led them step by excruciatingly slow step to the kitchen.

"Left it exactly as it happened," he said, using his cane to gesture grandly at the scene of the crime.

Draco looked around. A half-eaten breakfast lay arranged on the kitchen table. On the floor beside it lay a Quaffle amid shards of glass that had come from the gaping pane in the window over the sink. Draco took studious notes as Mr. Wright described exactly what had transpired, down to the smallest detail, including how he took his tea and how many bites of toast he'd had before the crime had occurred. Then he demanded to see Draco's notes and

spent a few minutes critiquing Draco's handwriting—Draco briefly regretted not asking Potter to take notes because wouldn't *that* have been entertaining—and then once again reiterated his demand that the hooligans be caught and arrested before he finished it all off by declaring Potter, who had been taking in the scene with an expression caught between fascination and horror, "a great useless potato, all eyes and no sense!"

As the door shut behind him and they made their way back down the front path, Draco tapped his wand to his notepad and reduced the top page to ashes with a quick *Incendio*. Potter was shaking his head slowly.

"Well, Potter?" he asked as they turned onto the sidewalk. He brushed the last bits of ash from his notebook and flipped it closed.

"I… He called me a potato." Potter's mouth pursed into a small and slightly-baffled frown. "I've never been called a potato before."

He sounded so bewildered that Draco could only grin. "You got off easy. My first time, I was, and I quote, 'a pretentious, useless son of a popinjay, and likely a miscreant to boot. Got the devil in his eyebrows, that one does.' To be honest, I still don't quite know what that means."

Potter was staring at him oddly, and Draco realized with a small start that this was the first time he'd ever really smiled at Potter. He'd done plenty of smirking at Potter, sure. Or smiled smugly or cruelly or mockingly, but he'd never genuinely smiled at Potter this way before, and now Potter was staring at him as if he'd lost his mind. Maybe he had. Draco cleared his throat and fixed his eyes on the sidewalk, and sped up his stride as if to outpace the awkward moment they'd fallen into.

"They're arched," Potter said presently, just as they came to the edge of Mr. Wright's fence.

"What?"

"Your eyebrows. I think that's what he meant," Potter said, peering at Draco. "They're really arched, and sort of pointy on top. Makes you look a bit mischievous, I suppose."

"I…" Draco honestly had no idea how to respond to Potter commenting on his eyebrows, or the implication that Potter had spent enough time studying his eyebrows to give any commentary on them at all.

"It's fine," Potter mumbled, staring very diligently at the pavement before him and not at Draco. "They match the rest of your pointy face."

Ah, insults. And just like that they were back on familiar ground.

"I'd return the favor of offering an analysis of your eyebrows, but between those ugly glasses of yours and that bird's nest you call hair, I can't recall ever having seen them," Draco retorted. He turned sharply up the walkway of the next house. "Here we are, then. The hooligans."

“Here? Are you sure?” Potter asked as he stared up at the neat cottage. “The, erm, hooligans live here?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it? And Merlin knows I’ve been out here enough,” Draco snapped back as they climbed the three shallow steps up to the porch

Though in Potter’s defense, Draco supposed it really didn’t look much like a troublemaker’s house, with its smart blue paint and white trim, neat flower beds flanking the walkway, and white lace curtains fluttering faintly in windows thrown wide to let in the cool spring breeze. But Draco knew better, and he took a steadying breath as he rang the bell. Instantly, the sound of pounding feet echoed up from inside, accompanied by shrill cries of “I got it, I got it!”

“You’re going to feel right at home here, Potter,” Draco muttered.

The door swung open before Potter could respond, and Draco found himself staring down into two identical round faces beneath two identical mops of unruly brown hair. They both grinned up at him, and one of them (Cecil? Colin? Draco could never keep them straight) had lost a front tooth since the last time he’d seen them.

“Hello,” said the one with the intact smile.

“How many times have I told you not to swing the door open to anyone who knocks!” came a scolding voice. “You never know—” A frazzled looking woman with a baby balanced on one hip rounded the corner and rolled her eyes heavenward when she saw Draco. “Oh bloody hell, what have they done now?” Two more children, a little girl just a year or so younger than the twins and a toddler that Draco guessed to be another girl based on its pink jumper, trailed behind her like ducklings.

“Sorry, Alice. It’s Mr. Wright again.”

Alice rolled her eyes again and sighed. “Isn’t it always? What did they do this time?”

“It looks like a game of Quidditch got a bit out of hand. They broke his window,” Draco said.

Alice rounded on the twins. “Quidditch? How were you playing Quidditch? I took your brooms away last week!”

Draco had been out here for that one, too. Mr. Wright had been livid when he’d stepped out his back door to tend to his herb garden and one of the twins (Cecil, Draco was fairly sure, was the guilty party that time) had zoomed by overhead and the toes of his trainers had just barely missed kicking Mr. Wright in the head. “He could have killed me!” Mr. Wright had said no less than a dozen times, while Draco stood there, dutifully taking notes while fervently wishing that Cecil *had*. Or knocked him unconscious, at the very least, because then Mr. Wright would be in St Mungo’s and Draco would still be enjoying his day. Parsons, the lucky bastard, had won their hasty round of Rock, Parchment, Shears and got to go next door to ‘round up the hooligans’ where Alice plied her with fresh baked scones in a blatant attempt at bribery. Parsons hadn’t bothered to save any for Draco.

“We weren’t playing Quidditch!” one twin insisted.

“We were just practicing throwing the Quaffle,” the other one added.

“It’s not our fault that it went in the window. Mellie was supposed to be tending goal,” the first one said.

“Mellie,” Alice ground out, stabbing a finger at the toddler, “is *two years old*.”

“Told you that you should’ve been Keeper,” one twin said to the other, punctuating his words with a light shove.

Alice made a wordless sound of frustration. “Cecil, Colin, you go up to your room right this instant. You are in so much trouble!”

Sulking, they went, Alice’s black look following them every step of the way. When they vanished at the top of the stairs, Alice sighed and turned back to Draco. “I’m so sorry,” she began.

Draco held up a hand. “It’s fine. He wasn’t that upset. We’ll just go back and fix his window for him, no harm done. Do you want the Quaffle back?”

“No, you might as well just Vanish it because there will be *no Quidditch at all until you’re old enough for Hogwarts*!” This last was bellowed up the stairs. “It’s a shame they didn’t wait until this afternoon. I’d have had a batch of scones done then.” She blinked at Potter as if noticing him for the first time. “You’re Harry Potter.”

Potter shifted uncomfortably. “Um, yes. Nice to meet you.”

“Well then,” Draco broke in briskly. His good breeding urged him to make the formal introductions but Alice was staring at Potter with eyes aglow and Draco didn’t think he could stand to bear witness to a round of Potter-worship right now. “We’d best go and smooth things over with Mr. Wright.”

He practically dragged Potter out the front door and left Alice to lecturing her twins. Outside again, he made his way off the porch and down the path and back onto the sidewalk.

“What did you mean by you think I’d fit in there?” Potter asked.

It sounded like a challenge, but Draco looked at his partner only to find Potter regarding him curiously. “They remind me a bit of your Weasleys. Minus the red hair, of course. The twins especially.” He shrugged.

“They do, a bit,” Potter agreed with a wistful glance back at the house, then sighed. “Do I really have to go back there? Couldn’t you just…?” He waved a hand at Mr. Wright’s house.

“We’re partners now, Potter. Where I go, you go.” Draco nodded to where Mr. Wright was waiting on the porch. “Besides, it’s too late. He’s seen you already.”

“I see you haven’t arrested them,” Mr. Wright grumbled as they walked up to his house.

“Yes, well, the Ministry does tend to frown on their Aurors arresting six-year-olds,” Draco replied.

“And that’s just what’s wrong with it,” Mr. Wright said and segued neatly into another round of ‘When I Was a Lad’ while Draco stood on the porch and wondered what he’d done in a past life to deserve this, and Potter, the Great Savior of the Wizarding World, cowered behind him, well out of cane-range. “And what will be done about my window?” he finished.

“You’re in luck, Sir,” Draco said brightly and hauled Potter up beside him. “In addition to vanquishing Dark Wizards, the great Harry Potter is also England’s foremost expert in window repair.”

“I—what?” Potter turned to gape at him, spoiling the illusion of competency Draco was hoping he’d project. Draco kicked Potter in the ankle as subtly as he could, which Potter promptly ruined by glaring at him and saying, “Ow, you kicked me!”

“Yes Sir!” Draco said loudly, ignoring Potter. “Whether there’s a wizard gone bad or a broken window in need of repair, Harry Potter’s your man.” He gave Potter a shove forward. “Go on then, Potter. Don’t keep the poor man waiting.”

“Expert in window repair? Has he been certified in home restoration?” Mr. Wright was watching them suspiciously.

“Oh, of course,” Draco said easily. “Everything is on file at the Ministry.” He forced a smile and hissed “Shoes!” at Potter just before the idiot was about to walk inside.

Potter grimaced at him and dragged his feet enthusiastically against the mat. A few minutes later, window repaired and Quaffle Vanished, they made their escape.

Back on the sidewalk again, Draco undid a button on his Auror robes to reach inside and pull out his pocket watch. Just after ten, that left plenty of time to take care of their last case before lunch. Potter was still looking a bit shell-shocked by all of this, and Draco’s late night was beginning to catch up with him.

“We could take a break before we attend to Mrs. Dodson’s break-in,” he suggested as he tucked his watch away.

“God, yes,” Potter said. “Is it always like this? Your cases, I mean?”

“Pretty much,” Draco said. “Though I usually only get them one at a time. Three in a day is highly unusual. Here.” He offered his arm.

Potter took it and Draco Apparated them to a quiet stretch of Diagon Alley lined with narrow little shops.

“There’s a tea shop just there.” He pointed. “And a coffee shop a bit further down. That’s where I’m going, I need the caffeine. And here,” He gestured to the shop just in front of them, with dusty plate glass windows and a faded sign proclaiming ‘Dodson’s Curiosities’ above the door, “is Mrs. Dodson. Shall we meet back here in, say, fifteen minutes?”

“That’s fine. I just need a bit of a walk, I think,” Potter said. “Fifteen sounds good.”

He turned and walked away, and Draco headed in the opposite direction for the blessed pick-me-up of a good cup of espresso.

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Harry didn’t see how Malfoy could do this day in and day out. Three cases into their partnership and Harry already wanted to beat his head against the nearest hard surface, yet Malfoy had handled everything so far—the thankless clean-up work, the barmy cat lady, the terrifying cane-wielding old man—with remarkable composure and a self-restraint Harry hadn’t thought him capable of. And, even more surprisingly, Malfoy seemed to be applying that same composure and self-restraint to their new partnership. Frankly, at this point yesterday Harry would have bet the contents of his vault down to the last dented Knut that they’d have punched each other by now. Instead, Malfoy had cleaned his office for him, and today they’d managed to be mostly civil to each other. There had been some amount of bickering, and Harry really would have appreciated more of a warning about wiping his shoes properly, but all in all Malfoy had been surprisingly nice to him.

Harry paused to peer into a shop window without really seeing the contents, and decided right then and there that if Malfoy of all people could make an effort to get along with Harry, then the least Harry could do was make an effort to get along back.

It’d make his investigation easier, at any rate.

He returned to Dodson’s Curiosities ten minutes later to find Malfoy already waiting for him. “Ready when you are,” he sighed.

“Cheer up, Potter. There’s a reason I saved Mrs. Dodson for last,” Malfoy told him and pulled the door open in a dull tinkling of bells.

Inside the shop was every bit as dusty and dim as it looked from the outside, and an astounding variety of junk and knick-knacks weighed down every available surface of the dozens of tables and shelves that crowded the floor in no discernible organization. He hadn’t seen such a sheer quantity of *stuff* since the last time he’d been in the Room of Hidden Things. He shivered at the memory of searing heat and leaping flames and heart-racing terror. Malfoy didn’t seem affected by the memory, and Harry did his best to push it away.

“Hello?” Malfoy called out, stepping forward slowly. Scuffed floorboards creaked beneath his feet.

An elderly woman emerged from behind a set of shelves crammed with teetering stacks of mismatched china and cutlery. She was short, made shorter by her stooped back, and wore her snowy white hair pulled back in a loose chignon from which a white quill wobbled as she shuffled forward with one knobbly-knuckled hand holding steady to a polished wooden cane.

She broke into a wide smile and the lenses of the spectacles perched atop her head winked in the light as she tilted her head to squint up at him.

“Oh, there you are, Draco dear. I’m so glad you were able to come.”

And even though she sounded more like she was greeting guests stopping by for a casual cup of tea than an Auror investigation, Harry couldn’t stop himself; he took a step back as she and her cane approached. Malfoy sneered at him before turning back to smile back at the woman.

“Mrs. Dodson,” he said, his voice warm and relaxed and just about as un-Malfoy-like as Harry had ever heard it. “What seems to be the trouble today?”

She sighed and shook her head. “They’ve broken in again, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, of course,” Malfoy said. He clasped his hands loosely behind his back, drawing Harry’s attention to the curve of his arse. Harry quickly looked away. “Do you know what was taken?”

Harry didn’t see how anyone could possibly keep track of even half of the things in here, but Mrs. Dodson nodded sagely. “They’re getting smarter. They took my glasses so I wouldn’t know what else they took from me.”

Malfoy didn’t bother to hide his smile—the same shockingly genuine one that had surprised Harry on the sidewalk outside Mr. Wright’s house—as he reached out and plucked the spectacles from her head. “Do you mean these?”

Mrs. Dodson *tsked* and gave him a self-deprecating little smile as she perched the glasses on the end of her nose. Her eyes made their way to Harry and she blinked and stared at him. “Has anyone ever told you that you look just like that boy Harry Potter?”

Malfoy snorted and his shoulders shook as he held back a laugh.

While Harry was still trying to figure out how to respond, Mrs. Dodson continued, “I’m sure you’ve heard of him, he’s quite famous after all. But you’re a bit taller than he is, I think.” She paused and studied him. “And your hair is a little worse.”

Malfoy had to turn away at that as he dissolved into a coughing fit, and Harry resisted the urge to give him a good wallop between the shoulder blades under the guise of helping. Mrs. Dodson’s attention returned to him.

“Draco, dear, are you all right? Would you like me to get you some water?”

“No, no thank you, I’m fine,” he managed. He coughed once more. “Sorry. Now, did you notice anything else missing?”

“I’ll have to take a look around, now that I’ve got my glasses back,” Mrs. Dodson said, neatly skirting the issue that they’d never really left her possession in the first place. She blinked at Harry again and frowned. “Why are you here with him? Where’s that nice girl you always come round with, Draco?”

For a moment, it seemed that the whole shop held its breath, then Malfoy sighed and said, “She’s dead.”

Another few seconds of silence ticked past, and Mrs. Dodson nodded. “I’ll make you some tea.” She went shuffling off, weaving between crowded tables and loaded shelves with a deftness that Harry found surprising from someone who needed a cane. She paused just at a small doorway beside the register. “Cake plate,” she called back. “The one with the little butterflies painted round the edge.” And she vanished through the door.

“Cake plate?” Harry repeated, confused.

Malfoy sneered at him. “Yes, Potter, cake plate. The one with the little butterflies painted round the edge, or weren’t you listening?” He turned in a small circle, scanning the room.

“I heard her perfectly well, I just have no idea what it means,” Harry snapped. Belatedly, he remembered ‘Malfoy having a rough time with the death of his former partner’ and ‘Malfoy making an effort to be nice’ and ‘making an effort to be nice too.’ He tried again. “So, what about this cake plate with butterflies on it?”

“We’re looking for it,” Malfoy said as he walked slowly along a buffet. He paused to peek into the drawers before continuing to the roll-top desk beside it.

“In here?”

The look Malfoy leveled at him could have curdled milk. “Yes, in here,” he said slowly, as if speaking to a child. “Though if you’d like to look elsewhere for it, you’re perfectly free to do so.”

Harry swallowed his snarl of frustration. “But why would it be here if it was stolen?”

Malfoy snorted. “That’s the question, Potter.” He’d moved on to a table full of teapots and vases, scanning it with sharp eyes.

“For the love of—“ Harry threw his hands up and stalked off to the other side of the room. To look for a stolen cake plate with little butterflies on it, apparently.

Some minutes later, he was hunched over a wicker chest full of embroidered tea towels when Malfoy said from just behind him, “It’s rather like a scavenger hunt.”

Harry started and looked up. “What?” He blinked, thrown by both Malfoy’s sudden appearance behind him and the light tone of his voice.

Malfoy waved his hand at the shop. “This. It’s always here, you know.”

“The cake plate?” Harry was having a hard time following along.

A corner of Malfoy’s mouth twitched up in an almost-smile. “The cake plate, or the carriage clock, or the serving spoon, or whatever else has gone missing. It’s always here, it just needs finding.”

Harry frowned. This wasn't becoming any clearer. "But, she said there was a break in. What sort of burglar breaks into a shop just to hide things?"

"The sort that visits Mrs. Dodson several times a week, evidently," Malfoy said with a heavy sigh. "I think there's a pile of crockery nearer the back. I'm going to go have a look."

He walked off, and it took Harry a few seconds to figure out that this was an apology of sorts, even though Malfoy didn't actually say sorry. Harry couldn't think of any other reason for Malfoy to announce that he planned to go looking through a certain pile of crockery. Ron did the same thing, sometimes, when they had a particularly bad disagreement. They'd both go off angry for a while, and then some time later Ron would show up and casually ask about Quidditch scores or going for a pint after work or some other casual inquiry whose sole point was to show that things were okay now.

"Fair enough," Harry muttered to the wicker chest as he pulled out another handful of tea towels. "I'm trying, too."

The cake plate still hadn't made an appearance by the time that Mrs. Dodson returned, struggling beneath the weight of a full tea service, complete with a plate piled high with tiny sandwiches. Malfoy hurried to take it from her, and he carried it over to a small round table just before the front window without being prompted to do so. Two cane back chairs sat on opposite sides of the table, and Malfoy and Mrs. Dodson settled down on them.

Malfoy looked up at Harry standing awkwardly nearby. "There's another one of these along the right wall, just between the china hutch filled with candlesticks and the grandfather clock carved with gnomes. And really," he continued to Mrs. Dodson, "why anyone would want a grandfather clock carved with *gnomes* of all things is utterly beyond me."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Not everyone can have your impeccable taste, Malfoy," he muttered to himself as he wove his way toward the hutch and the clock.

"Not everyone has your exemplary taste, dear," Harry heard Mrs. Dodson tell Malfoy, and he couldn't hide a snort that turned into a choking cough.

"You all right over there, Potter?" Malfoy called.

"Perfectly!" he shouted back. He found the chair right where Malfoy said it would be, and wondered exactly how many times Malfoy had been here before.

He carried the chair carefully back the way he came and put it down beside the table, and sat down just in time for Mrs. Dodson to serve him a cup of tea. He drank it and ate little sandwiches while Malfoy and Mrs. Dodson chatted idly about the weather and the newest gossip and, to Harry's astonishment, the latest fashions in ladies' hats, which Malfoy was evidently familiar enough with to hold several strong opinions on, including brim size and number of ribbons and the appropriate length of any feathered adornments.

"Shut your mouth, Potter, you'll catch flies that way," Malfoy said, irritated, and Harry snapped his mouth shut. He hadn't realized he was staring. He ate another tiny sandwich.

The conversation finished up just as the tea did, and they left Mrs. Dodson to clean up while they continued to search the shop. Ten minutes later, Harry unearthed a cake plate with little blue and yellow butterflies painted along the edge from a box of baby shoes.

"This really has been the oddest day," Harry said to himself as they stepped outside.

He hadn't intended to start a conversation, but Malfoy sighed and said, "It's a fairly typical day for me, if a little busier than most, but it has been strange to share it with you."

"Mrs. Dodson seems nice," Harry offered as they walked.

"Mrs. Dodson *is* nice," Malfoy said. "Most people think she's completely off her rocker, but I think she's just lonely."

Something in Malfoy's tone caught Harry's attention and he turned to look at his partner. The set of Malfoy's shoulders had relaxed somewhat, and he stared ahead with a carefully neutral expression on his face. And Harry suspected…

"Malfoy, this is going to sound really stupid…" Harry trailed off, torn between his desire to know and his desire to avoid Malfoy hexing him.

"That's never stopped you before." Malfoy's tone was light, edging in on teasing, and that just added to how surreal this day already felt.

And really, it couldn't possibly get any weirder, so Harry went ahead and asked, "You don't, um. You don't really wear ladies' hats, do you?"

For a second, Malfoy just gaped at him, then his face screwed up into a familiar scowl. "No, Potter, I do not wear ladies' hats. Have not, and have no desire to." He snorted and flicked an annoyed glance at Harry. "And you were right, that was stupid."

"It's just that you seem to know an awful lot about them," Harry pressed on.

"I already told you," Malfoy said, and he sounded irritated again. "I strongly suspect that Mrs. Dodson reports all these break-ins because she's lonely. If I'm going to be sent out here anyhow and she wants to talk about hats…" He huffed out a sigh. "Then why the fuck not. We'll talk about hats."

"Hm," Harry said, and pressed his lips together to hide his smile, because he really thought he was right about this.

He didn't think that Mrs. Dodson was the only one who was lonely. And Harry suspected he wasn't the only one who'd noticed.

Chapter 3

The rest of the week passed by in a thin parade of trivial cases. Tuesday, they assisted with another round of Obliviations, these for a young Muggleborn's accidental magic manifesting in the middle of a crowded shopping center.

Wednesday, Harry rescued an honest-to-god kitten from an honest-to-god tree. Malfoy had laughed himself nearly sick while Harry was up there, clinging to the branches for dear life and swearing alternately at Malfoy and at the kitten, who had puffed itself up and hissed and spat and swiped at his hands with its teeny tiny needle claws every time he reached for it. Eventually he'd gotten it back safely to the ground, his hands covered in thin scratches, by which point Malfoy's laughter had evolved into a bizarre sort of wheezing and he'd had to sit down. Harry had wanted to be angry with him, but instead he felt a warm pleasure at making Malfoy laugh like that, until his cheeks turned pink and his eyes teared up, however indirect or unintentional it had been. He spent the rest of the day being rather alarmed by that realization.

Thursday was Mrs. Dodson again. They spent nearly an hour combing her shop for a silver hand mirror ("Not that one, dear, the one with the roses on the handle,") and a pair of white silk baby shoes embroidered with little blue stars.

On Friday, Harry rolled out of bed and washed and dressed and sat down to breakfast as usual, expecting much of the same to follow. But when he unrolled his copy of the *Daily Prophet* and saw Penelope Parsons' death splashed across the front page, he didn't need any talents at Divination to realize that today would be bad. He grabbed his Auror robes and rushed into work, leaving his plate of eggs growing cold on the table.

Despite arriving at work nearly half an hour ahead of schedule, he walked into his office to find Malfoy already there, blond head bowed over a stack of parchments, the tip of the black quill he held clenched in one fist bobbing as he scribbled something in the margins.

"Hey, Malfoy—" he began.

Malfoy's head jerked up and he lashed out with his wand. "*Incendio*!" he snarled, and the newspaper in Harry's hand turned to ash in a rush of heat.

"Hey!" Harry yelped, shaking his hand. Ashes fluttered to the floor.

Malfoy Vanished them with another twitch of his wand. "Shacklebolt wants to see you. I imagine it's about Parsons." He bent his head back to the parchment on his desk and resumed writing furiously.

Harry backed out of the room and shut the door. He flexed his hand as he examined his stinging palm. It had turned slightly pink but didn't seem burned at all. Harry wiggled his fingers, frowning. Malfoy had cast Incendio at the paper strong enough to reduce it to ash in an instant, but accurately enough that he'd avoided burning Harry's palm. Harry's mind spun

a little at that. He hadn't even imagined that level of magical precision possible, yet Malfoy had done it in a flash. Quite literally.

He stared at the closed door, and his brain ridiculously chose this moment to register that they'd finally got around to putting up Malfoy's nameplate just beneath his own. It read 'D. B. Malfoy, Auror' in neatly etched lettering, and for one crazy moment Harry actually considered going back inside to ask Malfoy what the B stood for. He backed away another step.

"It's because you haven't had your tea yet," he mumbled to himself, shaking his head, and he started down the hall to the Head Auror's office. He'd blame it on the tea, because the alternative was that he'd lost his bloody mind.

At Kingsley's office, he knocked briefly and waited for Kingsley to call him in. He shut the door behind him and looked at his boss. Kingsley appeared somber this morning, and Harry figured it would be best to play things safe and respectful.

He didn't take a seat, and waited for Kingsley to look up at him before he said, "You wanted to see me, Sir?"

"I take it you've seen today's paper?"

Right to business, then. "Yes, Sir, I have," he said, and hastened to add, "All they have is speculation."

Kingsley rested his elbows on the desk and steepled his fingers as he regarded Harry expectantly. "Do you have more for me than speculation?"

Harry frowned. "Erm, not really, no. I mean, I've looked into the other cases he was working when his partners died. The first three cases he was working when his partners were killed were never solved, and they all came in as anonymous tips through MLEP." Harry wasn't quite sure what it meant, but his instincts told him it was significant. Three times couldn't be a coincidence. "But Parsons doesn't fit that pattern. The only open case they had at the time was a consult on a potions case, and she wasn't even on duty." Harry paused. "And Malfoy was right here in the Ministry when she was killed. I checked all the exit points, and he didn't use any of them until he went home after he was questioned about being the last person to see Parsons alive."

"And you don't find that suspicious?" Kingsley replied. "That his partner is killed and when we find him to question him, he's right there in his office?"

Harry's frown deepened. "So, you think he hired someone to kill her and set up an alibi to break the pattern?"

"I think it's a possibility, and I expect you to look into it further," Kingsley said. "What else have you got for me so far?"

"Er, not much. We've only been working together for a few days, so I don't really have anything else on Malfoy," Harry admitted.

Kingsley raised his eyebrows. “And that hasn’t been enough time for you to write up a report for me either?”

Harry had thought about writing a report, but kept putting it off while he did other things, like heal his scratched-up hands and search for baby shoes. “Sorry, Sir. I’ll get that in for you today.”

“You’re absolutely right about that,” Kingsley said. “And you’ll have plenty of time to write it up as I’m keeping the two of you on deskwork for today. And on light duties next week as well, until this whole thing blows over. If it blows over,” he added ominously.

Harry repressed a sigh and the urge to ask his boss how his duties could possibly get any lighter than they’d already been this week. “Yes, Sir.”

“You may go.”

Harry stood and took a step toward the door, then hesitated and turned back to face his boss. “Sir. I…” He took a deep breath and continued, “I really don’t think Malfoy is guilty of this. He’s not a murderer.”

Kingsley’s expression hardened. “Do you have evidence?”

“Well, no, but… I know him. I know he’s not capable of that.”

“Harry,” Kingsley said sternly. “I have been through two wars. I’ve seen the Death Eaters do terrible, unspeakable things, and at the end of both wars I’ve seen Lucius Malfoy escape Azkaban thanks to the testimony of witches and wizards who swore on their lives that they *knew him*. That he’s *not capable* of that sort of thing. Imperius. Blackmail. *Polyjuice*, they said. He had no choice, he was forced, he was framed. That’s what they all said.” Kingsley’s voice rose as he spoke, and Harry understood his frustration. Lucius Malfoy deserved Azkaban, after what he’d done, and Harry was just as frustrated as the next Auror that he’d managed to buy his way out of facing justice a second time.

“But Malfoy’s not his father,” Harry said.

“Then bring me proof of that,” Kingsley said. “And in the meantime, I’ll be waiting on your report.”

Biting his tongue, Harry went. If this morning was any indication of how the rest of it would go, today would undoubtedly going to be a very long and trying day, with him cooped up in his office and Malfoy in a mood. He’d just have to make the best of it. Keep calm and don’t let Malfoy get under his skin.

By mid-afternoon Harry’s last nerves had stretched themselves to the breaking point. Malfoy had taken over his side of the office with some unfathomable urge to cross-reference all of Harry’s files not just by type of crime, but also by location and culprit, which Harry frankly thought was overkill, but he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. If Malfoy wanted to cross-reference his files by the color of the perpetrator’s underpants, he was more than

welcome to do it because it kept him mostly quiet and more or less occupied through what was turning out to be a very long day.

Made far longer, Harry thought as he adjusted himself around a loose spring yet *again*, by the fact that he'd been relegated to the most uncomfortable sofa in the world while Malfoy did it. He turned sideways to lean his back against the arm and put his feet up on the cushions, and propped his stack of parchment up against his knees to study it, chewing thoughtfully on the end of his quill. Kingsley obviously wanted Harry to report anything unusual about Malfoy, but Harry honestly couldn't come up with anything beyond the facts that Malfoy hadn't tried to hex him yet, and that he knew a disquieting amount about the current fashion trends of women's hats. Harry felt pretty sure that's not the sort of 'unusual' that Kingsley had in mind.

Lost in thought, he jumped when Malfoy slammed a thick stack of folders onto Harry's desk with a resounding bang.

"For the love of Merlin, will you get that bloody thing out of your mouth?" Malfoy glared at Harry, eyes narrowed and mouth twisted into a sharp frown.

Harry stared at him, then down at the bedraggled end of his quill, then up at Malfoy again. "What?"

"You've been chewing on that blasted thing for the past hour and it's absolutely disgusting. If I have to watch you do it much longer, I won't be held accountable for my actions." He waved an imperious hand at Harry. "It's bad enough I have to look at you dressed in those things. It's entirely unprofessional."

Harry had taken off his Auror robes several hours earlier, figuring that if he had to spend the day stuck in his office then he might as well be comfortable while doing it. Beneath his uniform, he wore his usual t-shirt, jeans, and trainers. He'd been pleasantly surprised at the time that Malfoy hadn't commented on his thoroughly Muggle outfit, but apparently he'd only been saving it up for later.

"There's nothing wrong with it," Harry said. "And it's covered by my robes most of the time, anyhow."

"It's unprofessional," Malfoy repeated with an scornful curl of his lip.

"Well if you don't like it, then don't look," Harry shot back. And against all of his better judgment, he very deliberately stuck the end of the quill back in his mouth.

Malfoy gave an infuriated snarl and flicked his wand. The quill Vanished. Harry's mouth dropped open and he sat up.

"You bastard, that was the self-inking kind!"

"I don't give a damn if you plucked it from the arse of a hippogriff yourself!" Malfoy snapped. "You obviously didn't value it or you wouldn't have been trying to consume it."

Harry felt his temper rising and he made an effort to bring himself under control. “It’s none of your business what I do with my things,” he said.

“It is when I’m forced to watch you,” Malfoy snapped.

“No one’s forcing you to do anything!”

“You know what, Potter?” Malfoy snarled. “For once in your life, you’re absolutely right.”

Malfoy slammed the door as he left, and Harry scowled after him. After a moment, he used a quick *Accio* to bring his briefcase over to him, and after a few seconds of rooting around in it, he found a ballpoint pen. Uncapping it, he set it to the parchment before him and wrote out, ‘Draco Malfoy is an enormous bastard.’ And because he was sitting here in his Muggle clothes and writing with a Muggle pen, he went ahead and finished it off with a Muggle reference as he continued to write, ‘And he thoroughly deserves to have a house dropped on him.’

At that point, Harry gave up on digging through Malfoy’s actions over the past week for anything suspicious and instead settled for writing down everything. If Kingsley wanted to find something suspicious, he was more than welcome to bloody well sort it out for himself.

An hour later, by five o’clock, Malfoy still hadn’t reappeared. Harry shook the writing cramps from his hand and stretched. He made copies of his parchment, tucked the originals away in a bright orange Top-Secret folder, labelled it ‘Draco sodding Malfoy’ and shoved that into his bag. He nearly picked up his robes from where he’d tossed them over the arm of the sofa, but decided to leave them there where they were more likely to annoy Malfoy. Instead, he went behind his desk to the stack of clothing he’d been meaning to take home with him all week and pulled a light grey hoodie from the stack and gave it a sniff. It only smelled faintly of old clothes so he pulled it on over his t-shirt.

Harry dug around in the drawers of his desk for another Top-Secret folder to cram Kingsley’s copy of his report into. He scrawled Kingsley’s name across the front and dropped it into his Outbox, where it disappeared with a small pop, and then his tray gave a pleasant little ding to let him know the copy had arrived in Kingsley’s Inbox. That taken care of, Harry left his office to go find Ron.

The door of Ron’s office stood ajar, and the sounds of a disagreement in progress leaked into the hall. Compared to his and Malfoy’s disagreement, of course, this sounded like a casual chat but at least he’d conducted his with the door shut and silencing charms fully activated. He hastened his steps and knocked briskly on the door, and the voices cut off immediately.

Harry stuck his head in. Ron and his partner, Matthias Smith, stood in the middle of the room facing each other. Ron held his arms crossed stubbornly over his chest, and Smith’s face had turned an interesting shade of puce. He shook his dark blond hair out of his face and narrowed dark eyes at Harry in a way that reminded Harry of his younger brother Zacharias. It seemed that arsehole genes ran strong in this particular family.

“Can we help you, Auror Potter?” he bit off.

“Just seeing if Ron’s ready to go,” Harry said, glancing between the pair. “I can come back if you’re busy.”

“No,” Ron broke in. “We’re done.”

“But—“ Smith began angrily.

“We’re done,” Ron repeated, cutting him off, and grabbed his robes from the hook by the door.

In the hallway with the door firmly shut behind them, Ron made an incoherent noise of frustration. “That ass,” he said.

Harry gave Ron’s arm a conciliatory pat. “Least he’s not Malfoy.”

Ron just sighed. “True.” He glanced at Harry as they made their way to the Apparition Point. “I saw the papers this morning.”

“So did he.” Harry rubbed at his temple. “I think this conversation can wait until I’ve got a pint glass in my hand.”

Ron nodded. “Fair enough.”

One Apparition to a deserted alley and half a block’s walk later, Harry and Ron stepped into the Red Oak and Harry could feel the day’s tensions sluicing away as the crowded room enveloped him in warmth and noise. Every Friday night, he and Ron and a couple dozen other Aurors, some of whom he knew and some he didn’t, descended on the Red Oak for a few hours of relaxing after a week well done.

“Is Hermione coming out tonight?” he asked loudly to be heard over the dull roar of laughter and chatting.

Ron shook his head. “Still on nights. But she finishes up her Emergency Department rotation this week, and she’ll be starting on Pediatrics. And back on a normal-person schedule, thank Merlin.”

Harry couldn’t help a grin at that. He’d missed having Hermione around on Friday nights and looked forward to her joining them again. He still found it a little odd to think of her as a Healer—he and everyone else had assumed she’d either end up in politics or academia—but she was top of her class, and now she’d nearly completed her residency at St. Mungo’s. She still hadn’t decided what specialty she’d take, but she had a few more months to work that out. With her grades, she’d have her pick.

“Go get us a table,” Ron said, breaking Harry out of his thoughts. “I’ll grab us something from the bar.”

Harry nodded and headed for their usual spot near the far wall. He had just dropped down into his usual seat at the corner when the bell by the door clanged and the pub quickly fell silent as everyone turned their attention to two men standing beside it.

“Evan Campbell is our man tonight!” one of them hollered, and pounded his companion across the shoulders.

The pub went up in cheers, and Harry clapped politely even though he’d only met Campbell in passing and had no idea how he’d nearly died this week. No one could quite remember when or how it started, but by longstanding tradition, any Auror who’d had a close call in the line of duty that week was announced by the bell, and everyone else spent the rest of the night buying drinks for him or her. Ron returned with two pint glasses and sat one down before him.

“What happened to Campbell?” Harry asked and took a grateful sip of his pint.

“You didn’t hear about that?” Ron sipped at his beer and licked a spot of foam from his lips. “Some bastard who took objection to being arrested hit the wall behind him with a Reductor Curse. Whole thing came down, missed Campbell by this much.” He held his fingers a hair’s breadth apart. “You know, it’s been a while since you’ve had a near miss. That time you got caught a Blasting Curse was back in December, wasn’t it?”

“Since both of us have,” Harry pointed out. “You haven’t had a night since, what, October? That’s nearly six months. And anyhow, I’m perfectly safe for the time being.”

“I don’t know,” Ron said slowly, and Harry prepared to hear more speculation about Malfoy being a murderer. “The next time you rescue a kitten it might actually succeed in clawing you to death.”

Harry winced. “Well, I guess there’s always next week.”

“Yeah,” Ron said with a grin and took another sip of his pint. “Maybe next week you’ll have to rescue a puppy.”

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Draco hadn’t held out much hope of the papers letting go of Parsons’ murder so quickly, but he was still disappointed to see that he’d made the front page again on Sunday. EX-DEATH EATER STILL DABBLING IN DEATH? the headline blared in an unnecessarily large font, followed by three and a half columns of complete and utter twaddle. In an astounding display of self-control, Draco hadn’t blasted the stupid thing into confetti. Instead, he dropped it into the rubbish bin and went to dress for his weekly lunch at the Manor.

He dressed the same as he did every day for work, partly out of habit and partly because he knew his Muggle clothing annoyed his father. He selected a pair of charcoal grey trousers, which he paired with a light grey shirt and a burgundy waistcoat. He knotted his matching tie in a perfect half-windsor before he buttoned up the waistcoat and slipped his pocket watch into place, taking a moment to adjust the chain into an elegant curve across his abdomen. Last, he slid his feet into polished black leather loafers. After he took a moment to regard

himself in the mirror, he pulled a plain black robe from his wardrobe and shrugged into it, both as a nod to Wizarding fashion and to keep that pinched look off his mother's face. He left it open down the front.

A few minutes later, he stepped out of the Manor Floo and went straight to the dining room where his parents sat waiting at the table. Much to his surprise, neither of them mentioned the ugly *Prophet* articles. Instead, they all made stilted and polite chit-chat about the weather and how nicely the gardens had begun to bloom as they ate, while Draco grew more and more anxious about the conversation he knew was coming.

They were just finishing up when Lucius said, "And when might we expect you to give your notice?"

And there it was. Draco swallowed back a sigh. "I'm not quitting."

"Lucius," Narcissa said gently, but obediently quieted when Lucius held up a single index finger in her direction. Draco's eyes narrowed at that. He hated when his father treated his mother like a child. He hated even more when his mother let it happen.

"Draco, we have entertained this foolish notion for long enough. Hasn't this death convinced you that your place is here at the Manor?" Lucius leaned across the table, his eyes intense. "No Malfoy has ever *worked* before you. These deaths are a sign that it's time to give it up and do what you were born for. Take a wife, produce an heir, and take up your title as Lord of this Manor."

It was the same tired old argument he'd heard a thousand times before, but this time it scraped across nerves already rubbed raw. "I have no intention of getting married," he said before he could stop himself.

Lucius pulled back as if Draco had struck him, and Narcissa sucked in a surprised little breath.

"You have a duty to this family—" Lucius began, and Draco just couldn't take any more. He'd spent far too much time this week biting his tongue and if he continued this conversation he'd say something they'd all regret.

His chair scraped the floor as he stood up. "I have to go."

"I'll walk you out," Narcissa said smoothly over Lucius's indignant sputtering.

"Mum," he said, out in the hall.

"Hush, darling," Narcissa said. She tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow as they walked. "Your father means well, you know. He sees how that job wears at you sometimes. He just wants you settled and happy. We both do."

Draco swallowed. He had no trouble standing up to his father; Lucius had lost all right to tell Draco how to run his life after the mess of things he'd made with the Dark Lord. And he'd become a little bit unhinged after the war anyhow, and far too fixated on forcing Draco to

quit his job and take over running the Malfoy estates, insisting that Draco rebuild their family name while refusing to see that rebuilding the family name was exactly what Draco was trying to do with his job as an Auror. But Narcissa, with her soft words and earnest eyes, well. He had a much harder time disappointing her.

“I know, and I appreciate that you do. But I’m an adult now, I can make my own decisions. And I really do love my job, even if sometimes I don’t like it all that much.”

Narcissa’s eyes shone. “So stubborn. You and your father are so alike sometimes.” She reached up and brushed a lock of hair from his forehead with cool fingertips. “I’m glad you’ve decided to grow your hair out, Draco. It really does suit you.” She smiled, wistful. “You look just like your father did when he was your age.”

Draco nodded, and kissed her cheek. “Goodbye, Mum.”

He stopped to get his hair cut on his way back home.

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Harry walked into work on Monday morning, determined to get along with Malfoy no matter how big a pillock he insisted on being. The papers were still running rubbish about him, though they’d faded to just two columns on page two, not much of an improvement but a downward trend nonetheless. He found Malfoy already at work, as had quickly become usual, seated at his desk and sorting through a large stack of files. He looked different, and it took Harry a moment to work out how.

“You’ve cut your hair.”

Malfoy’s head snapped up. “Oh, well spotted, you!” he exclaimed. “With your keen observational skills and eloquence when stating the bloody obvious, it’s no wonder you decided to become an Auror!”

Harry didn’t rise to the bait and Malfoy went back to sorting through his stacks of folders. Harry pulled off his robes and dropped them on his stack of clothing, made yet another mental note about remembering to take all that home, then sat at his desk and put his aforementioned keen observational skills to work as he watched Malfoy without being too obvious about it. This was shorter than he’d ever seen Malfoy’s hair before, and while he thought longer hair suited him better, this wasn’t all that bad. At least he hadn’t slicked it severely back, like he used to at Hogwarts. Instead, he wore it parted on the left and swept the short fringe aside over his forehead. He looked neater like this, more professional. And also colder and more unapproachable than he’d seemed last week. Harry sighed. Malfoy looked up at the sound and glared at him. Harry sighed again and reminded himself to be nice.

His resolution only lasted a few hours. By lunchtime they were screaming at each other.

“You don’t understand what it’s like!” Malfoy shouted, and for a second Harry could only stare at him in disbelief.

“Have you lost your bloody mind? Have you somehow forgotten who you’re talking to?” Harry yelled back. “I’m possibly the only other person who *does* know what it’s like!”

“Oh, please,” Malfoy sneered. “It’s not the same at all. They all adore you!”

“Yeah, this week,” Harry shot back. “Do you even read the sodding papers? Just last week they were speculating that I was only working as an Auror as part of a plot to take over the world.”

Malfoy folded his arms across his chest. “They’re more favorable than not.”

“And that still doesn’t make it enjoyable to have them pick apart my life!” Harry shouted at him, and began quoting headlines. “The Boy Who Lived Goes Out For a Pint; Turn To Page 5 For Details of The Chosen One’s Alcohol Addiction! Harry Potter Spotted Purchasing a Stuffed Bear; Does Our Savior Have a Secret Family?” He waved his hands. “Front page news, Harry Potter Goes Shopping For Groceries!”

“At least they’re not accusing you of killing anyone!”

“Yeah,” Harry said again. “This week. And only because they’re distracted by you!”

They both became aware of the open door at the same time.

“Sorry, am I interrupting?” Ron asked, lingering in the open doorway.

“A knock on the door would have interrupted us, but thank fuck you didn’t bother to do that!” Malfoy snapped at Ron.

Harry ignored him. “No, Ron, you’re absolutely not.” He rubbed a hand across his forehead. “What do you need?”

“I was just seeing if you’d like to get lunch.” He glanced uncertainly between his friend and Malfoy.

“Yes, lunch. Fantastic.” Harry grabbed his robes and hurried to the door as Malfoy continued to glare at him.

“I was thinking that Muggle fish and chips place we went to a couple of weeks ago?” Ron suggested.

“Sounds great,” Harry said, and tossed his robes in the general direction of the sofa.

A second later, his robes struck him from behind. He whirled, fumbling with them, to see Malfoy standing behind his desk with his wand drawn.

“I’m not your bloody house-elf!” he shouted.

“I wish you were!” Harry yelled back. “Because then I could just do *this* and be rid of you for good!” He flung his robes at Malfoy’s stupid sneering face and slammed the door behind him.

Ron, wisely, didn’t say a word as Harry stormed down the hall. He held his silence in the lifts, and let Harry fume quietly as they made their way to the Apparition Point. Silently, Ron offered his arm and Harry took it, letting his friend Apparate them to a deserted alleyway. They walked the short distance to the restaurant and took seats at the bar. The barman came up to take their orders, and Harry ordered a pint.

Ron raised his eyebrows at that.

“Don’t even start,” he said, jabbing a finger at Ron. “I know it’s against regulations to drink during the workday, but I can bloody well guarantee you that whoever wrote those bloody regulations never had to work with Draco sodding Malfoy when he’s in a snit.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Ron said mildly.

The barman returned with their drinks, a pint of lager for Harry and water for Ron, and Harry downed a quarter of his in one long drink. He sighed and set his glass on the bar.

“He’s driving me mad,” he said, tracing a finger through the condensation clinging to the side of his glass.

“I can see that.” Ron sipped at his water. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I want to pretend he doesn’t exist.” Harry heaved a sigh and took another long draught from his pint. “I want to pretend that I’ve got a nice normal partner who doesn’t drive me mad. Ron, I never thought I’d say this, but he makes me miss Andrews. He makes me miss Millburne. God help me, I’d take Heppner over him.”

Ron nodded, murmured a quick thank you to the barman as he sat two baskets of steaming fish and chips before them. He took a minute to douse his chips in vinegar before he turned to Harry.

“I knew it couldn’t last,” he said with a sigh. “You were so optimistic about it last week, but when has anything between you and Malfoy ever gone smoothly?”

Harry popped a chip into his mouth and chewed, promptly burning his tongue. He swallowed quickly. “He was fine until the stupid papers started calling him a murderer again. Then he went all…” He waved a hand.

“So do you when the *Prophet* goes off on another run about you.” Ron ate a chip and paused to lick the salt and vinegar from his fingers.

Harry cast a sidelong glance at him. “Why are you defending him?”

“I’m not. I’m just saying it explains why he’s acting like more of an arse than normal. It can’t be easy on him, having everyone thinking that he’s killed all his partners.” Ron shrugged and ate another chip.

“Augh,” Harry said. “I bet he didn’t kill any of them. I bet they all killed themselves just to get away from him.” He sighed and rubbed at his eyes, pushing his glasses up his forehead. “Sorry, sorry. That was over the line, I didn’t mean that.” He nudged his glasses back into place and peered at Ron. “Do you see what he’s driving me to? Something like that is going to slip out while I’m yelling at him and then we’re going to hit each other. *Actually hit each other*.”

“Who knows,” Ron said. “Maybe that would help.”

Harry gave him a dour look and dropped his head onto the bar.

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Wednesday, Draco decided to make more of an effort at getting along with Potter. This morning’s article about him, placed on page six and only half a column, had lacked most of the outlandish speculation that the previous articles had flaunted. He felt more in control of himself than he had since the news had broken on Friday, and wanted to keep that. And as easy as it was to rile Potter, if Draco wanted to have any hope of retaining his composure then he absolutely had to stop drawing Potter into arguments. Thus, making an effort.

He’d done fairly well that morning, he thought. At least, they hadn’t shouted at each other at all today and after the fights they’d been having this week, Draco definitely counted that as a success. To be fair, they hadn’t really talked to each other either, but Draco would take any improvement he could get.

Sighing, he stood up from his desk and stretched. He’d misplaced his favorite quill, and thought he might have left it on Potter’s desk from where he’d been trying yet again to force his filing into some semblance of order. He walked around his partner’s desk, spared a sigh for the stack of laundry that Potter had still not taken home—and in fact, judging by the unfamiliar red hooded *thing* tossed on top, had instead been adding to—and turned to the desk. Potter had been doing *something* with his own files, and a messy layer of them nearly obscured the top of his desk entirely. Not bothering to hold in another sigh, Draco swept them into an orderly pile when a flash of bright orange buried at the bottom caught his eye. Draco knew what Top Secret files looked like, even if no one had trusted him with one. He tapped the thin stack of regular files on the surface of the desk and stared at the orange one that lay face down on the blotter. Maybe it was an old case, but a glance down at the ones in his hands showed one for Mr. Wright, one for Mrs. Dodson… These were all current.

Draco’s hand reached out of its own accord, and he snatched it back just in time. Then hesitated. Looking inside the folder would certainly be wrong and would break nearly a dozen different protocols. But maybe he could just flip it over and read the label to see what the case was about… His hand reached out again.

Feeling ridiculous and irritated with himself, Draco nudged the folder so it sat squarely in the middle of the blotter, dropped the other case files in a neat stack beside it, and plucked his

missing quill from the jar near the lamp. Merlin, what was wrong with him? No doubt Potter had been assigned dozens of Top Secret cases in his time as an Auror. This one was likely a case left over from his previous partnership, and he hadn't shared it with Draco because it was absolutely none of Draco's concern.

He stalked back to his desk and flung himself onto his chair with enough force to make the springs creak. Whether Potter had left that file in the open out of absentmindedness or because he trusted Draco, it didn't matter. Draco was a professional. And if Potter did trust him, Draco didn't want that trust to be misplaced.

And speaking of trust, maybe it would do some amount of good for Draco to reach out a little on his own. Standing again, he swiftly undid the buttons of his Auror robes and sent them to hang neatly on a hook by the door with a quick swish of his wand. There now, he was both more approachable and more comfortable. Two birds with one stone and all that. He smoothed his hands over his waistcoat, the black one with the silver pinstripes, and adjusted the cuffs of his pristine white shirt to be sure they fully covered his wrists before he resumed his seat.

Ten minutes later Potter reappeared, smelling faintly of fried things. He didn't spare a glance at Draco as he stripped out of his robes, revealing yet another of those t-shirts he always paired with jeans, and why Muggles insisted on wearing colored undershirts as regular shirts, Draco would never understand. This one was emblazoned with a cartoonish pair of red lips with a big red tongue jutting from between them, with the words 'The Rolling Stones' printed just above. Potter turned around to hang his robes without Draco prompting him to do so, and Draco felt a warm surge of accomplishment. He'd only had to fling Potter's discarded robes at his head five times for him to learn that. Even the most stubborn of crups will learn if you rap its nose with a newspaper enough times.

Then Harry's brow furrowed as he stared at the set of robes already hanging there. He hung his up as well and turned to face Draco, and his expression twisted into bemusement.

"What on earth are you wearing?"

Despite his earlier intentions of goodwill toward Potter, Draco found himself scowling automatically and saying, "Clothes, Potter, something I know you're well acquainted with judging from that collection behind your desk that appears to be growing."

Potter glanced at his stack of clothing. "I'll take it home tonight. And that's not what I meant." He pointed an accusing finger at Draco. "You're wearing Muggle things!"

Draco lifted one imperious brow. "And?"

"And?" Potter cried. "And you're constantly on me about wearing Muggle things and here you are wearing them too!"

Draco set his quill down and folded his hands together on the desktop. "I never said anything about your Muggle things. I've only mentioned that you dress unprofessionally. A fact I maintain. Now would you please go back to your side of the office and take that *thing* with you? I feel as though it's staring at me."

Potter looked down at the big cartoon mouth as if he'd forgotten it was there, which Draco found hard to believe because it was bloody creepy. When Potter looked back up at Draco, his lips quirked up in an amused little grin that made Draco's irritation falter and fade. "It can't stare at you, Malfoy, it hasn't got eyes."

"Yet I still find it disturbing and offensive. Now be off with you." He flapped a hand at Potter's desk.

"At least it's current. Well, sort of current," Potter said, folding his arms over his chest and mercifully hiding part of that stupid tongue. "You're about a hundred years out of fashion. I mean, a pocket watch? Really?"

Draco frowned. "I like to know what time it is."

"And you've never heard of a wristwatch like normal people wear?"

"I'd constantly have to be pulling up my shirtsleeve to read it," he pointed out.

Potter rolled his eyes. "And that's *such* a hardship…" he began and then broke off, his expression going uncomfortable. "Because you'd have to wear it on your left arm. I'm sorry. I'm an idiot."

"You'll hear no arguments from me on that."

Potter shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and Draco just knew that the idiot was going to try to say something to make everything better. Because he was Harry bloody Potter, and that was just what he did. And sure enough, a moment later Potter said, "Just so you know, it doesn't matter to me. Your, um. You know."

Draco slid his right thumb under his left cuff and up the inside of his wrist until he encountered the first ridges of scar tissue. "Yes, well, it's not quite that simple."

Potter nodded like he understood. "Right."

He didn't understand, and how could he? He didn't know how Draco had compounded one stupid, rash mistake with another. And Draco would rather die than let anyone see, even Potter. Especially Potter.

Mercifully, Potter just sighed and went back to his desk. He stopped as he caught sight of the neatly arranged folders, and his eyes jerked up to Draco. "You straightened my desk."

"I left my quill over there," Draco said with a frown. And why would Potter care? As much as Draco continued to insist that he wouldn't play house elf around the office, this wasn't the first time he'd tidied Potter's desk and Merlin help him it probably wouldn't be the last. Then he caught sight of Potter's hand splayed protectively over the orange folder and understood. His ire came rushing back.

"I didn't read it," he snapped.

Potter merely watched him for a discomfiting length of time, then nodded. “I believe you,” he said. He took his seat and dropped the orange folder into the top drawer of his desk.

It really shouldn’t matter whether or not Potter believed him, but something warm and pleased twisted in Draco’s belly nonetheless. It was absentmindedness that had left the folder there on his desk, but it seemed that Potter trusted Draco as well.

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Friday morning found them at Dodson’s Curiosities for the sixth time that week—they’d been called out twice on Tuesday—which Malfoy had informed Harry was a new record for her. It had only solidified Harry’s earlier suspicions about why the elderly witch reported so many break-ins, especially seeing as how the two calls on Tuesday lined up with the most scathing article the *Prophet* had published about Malfoy. She never mentioned anything about the articles, but always insisted that they stay for a cup of tea after they’d tracked down whatever thing had been ‘stolen’ that day. Malfoy seemed to relax a little under her care, and those teas had been little islands of calm in their otherwise dysfunctional partnership, where they’d sat and sipped at their cups and managed to not shout at each other for a whole half-hour at a time.

Though they hadn’t done much shouting since Wednesday, Harry realized. Not since he’d come back from lunch with Ron to find Malfoy perched behind his desk without his heavy red Auror robes on. He’d continued to take off his robes in their office since then, his outfit underneath always a variation of the same quasi-Victorian theme. Today’s waistcoat was a bright cobalt blue embroidered with little gold curlicues, and he wore it with a light blue shirt that did very nice things for his pale complexion. Harry had been almost relieved when they’d been sent out to Mrs. Dodson’s and Malfoy had covered up that blue with his uniform robe.

Harry sighed and closed the doors of the china hutch he’d been sorting through in search of a pink glass candy dish in the shape of a seashell. He moved along to a rickety set of shelving that sagged beneath the weight of leather-bound books and small glass figurines. On the other side of the shelves, just out of sight, he could hear Malfoy digging through a chest of old clothing that Harry had just searched not five minutes earlier.

He was just about to move on when he heard the swish of robes and the tap of a cane on the wood floor.

“Draco, dear,” Mrs. Dodson said. “You don’t look well.”

Harry agreed, personally. While the color blue did look nice on Malfoy, it couldn’t touch the dark circles under his eyes or the pinched frown that seemed to be his default expression these days. Harry kept still, barely breathing in order to hear Malfoy’s response.

“I’m fine,” he murmured after a brief pause and resumed his digging.

Mrs. Dodson sighed. “I know this has been a difficult week for you.” She paused, and continued with a lowered voice. “Have you talked to anyone about it?”

“No,” Draco mumbled back.

“Really, now? Not even Harry? Hasn’t he asked?”

Harry had asked, just yesterday in fact. But Malfoy had leveled him with such a dark look that Harry, anxious to avoid another fight, had quickly let the subject go.

“I don’t…” Malfoy trailed off, then tried again. “I can’t…”

And Harry understood, because if the situation were reversed he wouldn’t exactly be eager to confide in Malfoy either.

“Malfoy?” he called loudly, stepping around the shelves, and both Malfoy and Mrs. Dodson jumped. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. Just wanted to let you know that I’m going to take a break and run down the street for some coffee. I’ll be back in fifteen.” They both stared at him, and Harry nodded once before turning and striding out of the shop.

He gave them closer to twenty, just to be safe, but when he came back he found them still sitting together on a narrow settee, Malfoy angled sharply toward Mrs. Dodson so that his knees nearly brushed hers. He held his hands clenched in his lap, and she had laid her palm over them. It reminded Harry of a much younger Malfoy confiding in a ghost because he didn’t have anyone else; it made Harry sort of uncomfortable to see that apparently not much had changed, Malfoy had just swapped in an elderly witch for Myrtle. They both fell silent as he walked in, and Harry very pointedly didn’t spare them more than a glance as he went back to work searching for the missing candy dish.

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Potter found the glass candy dish twenty minutes later, nestled safely inside a drawer of handkerchiefs, much to Draco’s relief. At this point all he wanted was to go back to his office and barricade himself behind his stacks of filing. But he caught the concerned glance Potter gave him as they stepped outside, and Mrs. Dodson’s advice about opening up to his partner a little more repeated through his head.

“I know what you did there, Potter,” he said as they stepped onto the street.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Potter said, darting another glance at Draco.

Draco sighed. “I know you overheard us. And I know that’s why you left.”

Potter shrugged, entirely unrepentant. “I thought you could use someone to talk to, and didn’t think you’d want to do it with me hanging about.”

“That’s incredibly astute of you,” Draco said.

Potter grinned at him, his green eyes bright behind his glasses, and Draco looked away. “Almost like I’m an Auror.” He paused. “Take off your robes.”

Draco whipped around to face him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Take off your robes,” Potter repeated, already working open the buttons on his own. “I’m taking you out to lunch and it’s a Muggle place.”

“I don’t… That’s really not necessary,” Draco said, fumbling for an excuse. “And I’ve got a lot of paperwork to catch up on.”

That was a lie and they both knew it. “Come on, Malfoy,” Potter said. “You can spare half an hour for lunch. I know you skipped breakfast this morning.”

Draco frowned at him. “How did you know that?”

He just grinned again. “I’m incredibly astute, remember?” Potter said. “Also, you just told me. Now come on. You’ve had a shit week. Let me take you to lunch.”

Several seconds ticked by where they just stared at each other, then Draco sighed. “Fine.” He knew Potter had a stubborn streak as wide as a Quidditch pitch, and he wouldn’t stop pestering Draco until Draco gave in. He made short work of the buttons of his robes, then shrunk them down and tucked them away in his pocket.

Potter offered an arm, which Draco took, and he Apparated them both to a narrow alleyway. They didn’t have to walk far from there before they arrived at a little café with a cheerful blue and yellow striped awning. Potter held the door open and they stepped inside.

“Go get us a table and I’ll buy,” Potter said as they joined the end of the long queue.

Draco couldn’t help but bristle a little at that. “You don’t have to pay for me.”

“Oh?” Potter said and bent his head to Draco’s ear as he asked, “Have you got Muggle money, then?” His warm breath tickled Draco’s ear, and Draco suppressed a shiver.

“No, but—“ he began

“Then go get us a table,” Potter said, and nudged him with an elbow.

Draco frowned and took a step back. He had a hard time thinking clearly with Potter standing so close. “Am I at least allowed to place my own order?”

Potter smiled and shook his head. “Nope. I’ve been here before so I know what’s good. Trust me.”

Merlin help him, but Draco did. “Fine,” he said and walked off, winding his careful way through the narrow lanes between small tables and occupied chairs. He found one by the window where the occupants were just packing up their things. He lingered nearby and slid

into one of the seats as soon as they left. After a quick glance around to be sure no one was watching him, he cleaned the tabletop with a surreptitious spell.

A few minutes later, Potter found him and set down a bowl of steaming chicken noodle soup before Draco, along with a plate of thick-sliced sourdough bread. He'd ordered the same for himself.

"Careful, it's hot," he warned, taking his own seat.

"I think I can manage," Draco muttered without any real venom. He took up his spoon and scooped up a bit of carrot and broth, and blew gently across it before sliding the spoonful into his mouth. His eyebrows rose. "This is good."

Potter nodded and smiled like he was pleased, then turned his attention to his own lunch. Draco sneaked glances at Potter as he ate, tearing off chunks of bread and dunking them in his broth at first, and then scooping out steaming spoonfuls of noodles and vegetables and gulping them down after the bread ran out. Draco was tempted to comment on Potter's somewhat appalling table manners, but there was something a little off about them, in the way he hunched forward over his meal and how he let his left hand rest almost possessively on the table beside his bowl and how he barely paused to chew before he swallowed down each mouthful, almost like he expected his lunch to be taken away at any moment.

Potter glanced up and caught him watching, and Draco bowed his head and turned his attention to his own soup, still puzzling over Potter's odd behavior. Potter finished before he did, of course, and though the soup really was delicious, Draco didn't have much appetite for it, not with the way his stomach twisted in apprehension of what he was about to do. After long minutes of silence, he tapped his spoon idly on the rim of his bowl and sighed to catch Potter's attention.

"Mrs. Dodson thinks I should talk to you more," he said in a rush, because he thought if he didn't get it out quickly then it wouldn't come out at all. "She's under the impression that I haven't got any friends." He darted an uncertain glance at Potter.

Potter regarded him quietly for a moment. "And do you?" he asked, his voice a little too casual.

"Of course I do," Draco said and turned to stare out the window. Potter didn't say anything, and after a moment Draco sighed. "Well, acquaintances. I've got loads of acquaintances." His shoulders slumped. "I'm pathetic, aren't I?"

He hadn't intended to say that last part aloud, but Potter answered him seriously. "Not pathetic. It's just that you're, erm, not a very open person."

He could tell Potter tried to phrase it delicately, but Draco still scowled at him. "Because they all hate me."

"And it's a circle like that," Potter said, leaning forward a little. "You close yourself off because they don't like you, and they don't like you because you never give them a chance to."

Draco felt his scowl darken. "Where's this coming from? Are you suddenly some kind of Mind-Healer?" Belatedly, he remembered that he was trying to make nice with Potter, but Potter only smiled at him.

"Oh yes," Potter said easily. "That's me. Boy Who Lived, armchair psychologist and window repair expert."

That got a faint smile out of Draco despite himself, and Potter smiled back. "I don't recall giving you much of a chance to get to know me."

"And yet, despite your best efforts otherwise, it seems that I am," Potter said.

Draco dropped his spoon into the bowl with clatter and scowled down at it. "So, what. You want to be my friend, Potty?"

Potter sighed. "I want to be your partner, Malfoy. That means some degree of getting to know each other, in the interest of working well together," he said, and sounded so reasonable that Draco didn't have a reply for him.

Draco folded his arms over his chest and turned to stare out the window again. He let almost a minute slip by in silence before he said, "She wants me to apologize to you."

Potter blinked. "Apologize? For what?"

"For being horrible to you? For being myself?" Draco shrugged. "I guess for picking fights with you." He hesitated. "You may have noticed that I've been under a great deal of stress recently."

"With the papers?" Potter asked.

Draco nodded and hesitated again. This wasn't easy, but Mrs. Dodson was right. He needed someone in his life that he could talk to. And if he couldn't trust Saint Potter, then who else could he turn to? Potter seemed willing to give getting along with Draco a legitimate attempt, and while it was easier in the short term to wall himself off and hold Potter at arm's length, perhaps taking a risk and opening up to him would pay off in the long term. Draco was surprised to find that he wanted to try.

"And… with my parents," he said finally. "They want me to quit my job, you know, settle down and start the next generation of little Malfoys." He let his gaze dart back to Potter before he stared out the window again. This was easier if he didn't keep eye contact. "And add to it that you're my new partner."

Mercifully, Potter chose to focus on the last thing he'd said rather than ask questions about Draco's tension with his parents and his reluctance to get married. Draco wasn't sure if he could have handled such a personal conversation, even though he was the one to bring it up in the first place. "Because it's me or because you're afraid I'll die too?"

Draco snorted. "Frankly, Potter, at this point I'm not sure you even know how to die." With some effort, he turned away from the window and met Potter's eyes. "It's just that it's been

difficult working with you. We haven't always gotten along."

Potter huffed out a soft laugh. "That's an understatement."

"You bring out the worst in me, I'm afraid," Draco said. He sounded defiant even to his own ears.

"Yeah, well, I'm not exactly sunshine and roses around you either. But look at this." Potter waved a hand at the table between them. "We just had lunch together, and now we're having a conversation that doesn't involve shouting or throwing things. I think we can make this work."

Draco leaned back in his chair. "When you say that, I almost believe you."

"I mean it," Potter said with a small smile. "We've already agreed years ago to let our past stay there, and you're really not so bad when you're not acting like a giant prick."

Draco frowned. "I think there's a compliment in there somewhere."

"Look, all I'm saying is that you're not the same person I hated at Hogwarts. You're smart, you take your job seriously, and honestly I think you're…" Potter trailed off and blinked a couple of times. When he spoke, his voice was faintly surprised. "You're probably the best partner I've been matched up with so far."

Draco couldn't resist rolling his eyes. "Now I know you're having me on."

"No, really," Potter said, leaning forward. "I mean, you've heard what happened with Heppner, haven't you?"

"Sorry, no. I'm usually a bit behind on office gossip. I'm not exactly the one people stop for a chat with in the break room," Draco said dryly.

"Oh. Well. He's why I was available to be partnered with you," Potter said. "We were on weekend rotation, which he'd already been whinging about. And that Sunday we finally caught up with the perpetrator we were tracking, and Heppner kept saying how it was nearly time to go home and we should just pick things up again on Monday. Anyhow, we were right there, right behind the guy, pressed into a doorway not ten feet behind him, in fact, when he announces that it's five o'clock and I'd better believe that he'd be putting in for overtime on this. And of course the wizard hears us and I end up dueling the bastard."

"I assume you won," Malfoy said, because that was the way things went.

But Potter surprised him by saying, "No, actually. He got away. I caught up with him again later, but it took another two hours."

"I can't imagine Heppner was too pleased with that," Draco said.

Potter rubbed a hand over the nape of his neck and looked sheepish. "Well, um, he wasn't with me. I sort of lost my temper with him and left him in the alley." He hesitated before admitting "Um, Stunned and Body-Bound."

For a moment, Draco could only stare at him. “Stunned and Body-Bound?” he repeated.

“I put a Disillusionment Charm over him before I left him. He was perfectly safe,” Potter said defensively, and Draco laughed, and Potter smiled at him. “And anyhow, he deserved it. So you see, that’s what I put up with. Half of the ones I’m assigned to think that working with me gets them a free ride, and the other half are so star-struck that they’ll agree to anything I say. I don’t want that.”

“What do you want?” he asked, tilting his head just a little to one side as he considered Potter.

“Someone who pulls their own weight and isn’t too awed by my mere presence to stand up and tell me when I’m being an idiot,” Potter said. “Which you do. So, yeah. You’re pretty much the best.”

“Potter, if I were to stand in a room full of dwarves, it still wouldn’t make me a giant,” Draco said dryly, but inwardly he was very, very pleased. “But thank you for the sentiment.”

“Anytime,” Potter said with a small, crooked smile that tugged at Draco’s heart.

Draco sighed, shoving this ridiculous Potter-attraction out of his mind. “And for the record, I suppose you’re not nearly as irritating as you could be.”

Potter laughed softly. “I think there’s a compliment in there somewhere.”

“Enjoy it, Potter, it won’t happen again.” Draco picked up his spoon and returned to his soup.

He dipped his spoon into his bowl and swallowed another mouthful, and the warmth of the broth did nothing to touch the warmth spreading behind his ribs from Potter’s words. Mrs. Dodson had been right; reaching out to Potter really was the right thing to do. He’d have to tell her, the next time he saw her. Probably next Wednesday. She always called in a robbery on Wednesdays. Draco looked across the table and found Potter watching him, and Potter gave him a quick smile before looking away. Draco smiled to himself before looking down at his bowl again.

For the first time since they’d been assigned to each other, Draco thought this could really work out.

Chapter 4

Back in their office, Harry spent the afternoon dividing his time between watching the clock and watching Malfoy, all the while doing his best to hide his watching by pretending to get through some paperwork. Malfoy had taken it into his head to reorganize more files, his own this time, which Harry was more than fine with since it meant he got to keep his desk. Malfoy had come up with some convoluted color-coding system which he'd attempted to explain to Harry and which Harry didn't even bother trying to understand, but it involved the many small piles of colored tabs that now littered Malfoy's desk.

Malfoy looked better now than he had in days. Harry still didn't know what exactly Mrs. Dodson had said to Malfoy to prompt him to talk to Harry like he had, but Harry thought he might have to thank her for it. He was still faintly surprised at how different Malfoy could be when he didn't carry his animosity around like a shield. Harry didn't know if this new openness would last, but he was determined to enjoy it as long as it did.

He continued to watch as Malfoy pulled down files, flipped through them briefly, affixed several of the little tabs in different colors, and slid the files back into place. He'd made it through a shelf and a half and the hands of the clock had chased each other to half past three when Malfoy's Inbox gave a little ping and a file folder popped into being.

"Oh!" Malfoy said like someone had just sent him an unexpected birthday present. He dropped the stack of files he held onto the desk and a little puff of colored tabs fluttered to the floor like confetti. He grabbed the new file from his Inbox and his smile grew as he leafed through it.

It was weird to see Malfoy smile, Harry thought, but a nice sort of weird. It made him look younger, more carefree. It made Harry wonder about the sort of person Malfoy might have become if he'd had a different life.

"What is it?" Harry asked, more to distract himself from his own thoughts than of any real desire to know what was in that folder.

Malfoy turned that smile on him, and Harry's stomach gave a not-altogether-unpleasant wobble that he really didn't care to think too hard about. "It's a case. Well, not exactly a case. More of a clean-up, I suppose you'd say." He stood and glanced at the clock, then reached for his Auror robes.

Harry stood too and began pulling on his own robes. "What is it?" he asked again because Malfoy hadn't really answered the question.

Malfoy looked up at him, hands stalling halfway up his buttons. "Hm? Oh, you don't have to come along. Parsons never did." His fingers resumed their task with the buttons. "It's going to be hours of tedious, delicate work that you won't be able to help with. It'll be boring for you, I'm sure."

“As if I wouldn’t jump on any chance to get out of this bloody office. Besides, where you go, I go, partner,” Harry said as they stepped out into the hall. “And you still haven’t told me what it actually is.”

“Sorry,” Malfoy said. “MLEP found another Death Eater safe house.” He glanced sidelong at Harry as they walked. “I may have not been entirely honest with you on our first day. Remember how I told you that all I get assigned are the unwanted MLEP overflow cases?”

“Remember it? I’ve been living it,” Harry said sourly.

“While that’s most of what I do, I also get called in as a consult on some of the bigger cases.” Malfoy continued. “I’ve got value when it comes to Dark Arts, specifically anything to do with Death Eaters. I’m fairly sure it’s why they keep me around at all.” He flipped through his file. “Sometimes I get pulled in on potions cases too, but mostly it’s anything Death Eater related.” Draco paused and made a wry face. “My Death Eater knowledge is unparalleled in the department.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Harry muttered before he could stop himself.

Sure enough, Malfoy leveled a baleful glance at him. “Say what you will, it does make me useful.”

“Sorry,” Harry said quickly, then went on. “So, we’re doing something with a Death Eater safe house?”

“We are indeed,” Malfoy said briskly. “There were hundreds of them, scattered all over England. Different Death Eaters set up different ones so that no one knew the locations of all of them. That way if one Death Eater was ever captured, he or she wouldn’t be able to give away all the rest. And to further complicate matters, every one of them is trapped to high hell.” Malfoy grimaced. “The Dark Lord was rather paranoid.”

“More like bugfuck crazy,” Harry put in.

“There is that, yes,” Malfoy agreed. “As I was saying, since most of the locations were kept secret and most of the people who set them up are dead, they’re still turning up even this many years later. Whenever MLEP or the Aurors stumble upon one of them, they scan it for inhabitants, and once they determine that it’s abandoned they send it over to me. I’ve got both the working knowledge of spells that Death Eaters were likely to incorporate into the place’s defenses as well as the experience to take them down safely.” He paused as they rounded the final corner to the Apparition Point. “That, and I’m expendable.”

At first Harry thought Malfoy was joking, but his face remained serious. “You can’t mean that.”

“I do. If I approach disabling a spell wrong and blow myself into a thousand pieces it’s not as if very many people will be shedding tears over me. In fact, I think a queue might form for all the people who’d leap at the chance to dance on my grave.” Malfoy shrugged. “They might even have to sell tickets.”

He sounded so calm about it, as if he were discussing the weather or the latest Quidditch scores, that Harry felt a sick twinge of pity for him. “People wouldn’t do that,” Harry said.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow at him. “Remind me to show you my collection of hate mail sometime, Potter. Ah, here we are, then.” He shrank down the file and tucked it away into his pocket before he offered his arm to Harry. “Ready?”

Harry took his arm. “Ready.”

The Ministry vanished with a soft bang and Harry found himself standing on a sidewalk in front of a huge house that fell just shy of qualifying as a mansion. The windows all gaped, empty and dark, their panes coated in a layer of dirt. The yard was more weeds than grass, and a tall wrought iron fence surrounded the place, the pointed top of each spindle jutting sharp against the sky. Malfoy already had his wand out and had set to work running diagnostic charms over the iron gate. Satisfied, he cast a quick Alohomora on it and the gate swung open. Harry started for it, but Malfoy stopped him with a hand to his elbow.

“Some ground rules, Potter. This place is dangerous,” he said. “Extremely dangerous and set up by someone who had no qualms about inflicting severe and debilitating damage. You remember my dear Aunt Bellatrix?” He fixed Harry with a solemn stare. “Setting up safe houses was her *favorite*. She felt it gave her a creative outlet.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Fuck.”

Malfoy smirked at him. “Yes, I thought that might impress upon you just how dangerous I mean. The curses and hexes on the outside are meant to keep people out. The ones on the inside are meant to disable, maim, kill, or otherwise occupy anyone who might wander in so that any Death Eaters in residence would have ample time to escape.”

Harry nodded and glanced up at the house. It suddenly looked a lot more imposing. “Got it.”

“So, the rules. You do not wander off on your own. You stay within my reach at all times. You step only where I step. You touch only… Actually, you touch nothing. At all. Am I understood?”

Part of Harry bristled at Malfoy ordering him around like a mum setting the ground rules before taking her child shopping in Diagon Alley, but he quashed it and nodded. Malfoy was definitely the expert here. “Very much so.”

“Right, then.” Malfoy turned back to the house. “Let’s go.” He cast a few more spells at the brick walkway that led up to the porch before he set off down it.

Harry followed along after him. As he passed through the gate, a shiver of apprehension crept up his spine and a flutter of trepidation settled in his belly. Another two steps and the shiver became a tingling pressure at the nape of his neck and the trepidation blossomed into nausea. Another three steps and a headache unfurled behind his eyes. One more and he broke out into a cold sweat, the headache grew teeth, and his guts cramped. Malfoy walked on, unaffected. A wave of dizziness struck Harry and he stumbled forward another step. He tried to call out,

but all that came up his throat was a pained croak and a mouthful of bile, and then his legs gave out.

He hit the ground, the rough bricks scraping his palms and knees, and his stomach roiled as a scrabbling panic seized him. His vision swam as another wave of dizziness crashed against him and he tried to call out for Malfoy again. Desperate and more than a little frightened he tried to crawl for the gate.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck,” Malfoy said from somewhere up the path. Rapid footsteps pounded bricks, and then warm, strong hands seized Harry under his arms and hauled him most of the way to his feet. “Fuck,” Malfoy said again as he half-carried, half-dragged Harry back out to the sidewalk.

As he passed through the gate, the sweet relief that hit him was nearly as much of a shock to his system as what he’d just been through. He stumbled away from Malfoy and managed to make it to the gutter before he fell to his knees and threw up. Malfoy didn’t say anything more, just crouched beside him and let him finish. When Harry’s stomach settled enough for him to sit back, Malfoy handed him a cup of water.

“Thanks,” Harry said, his voice raspy.

He took a big gulp of water, swished it around his mouth, and spat into the gutter. Rinsed and swished and spat again, and again. Malfoy tapped his wand to the cup and refilled it with another Aguamenti.

“Sip that, you should be fine in a few minutes,” he said, standing. “I’m very sorry, Potter, I didn’t think…” He sighed. “I’m so used to doing this alone that I just didn’t think.”

“What the fuck was that?” Harry thought about getting to his feet, but felt that it might be a little beyond him at the moment. Unwilling to stand up only to be struck by another wave of dizziness and pitch forward onto his face, he stayed sitting and sipped his water.

“You know the standard Muggle repelling and Notice-Me-Not charms we use to keep people away from places?” Malfoy waited for Harry’s nod. “These are their much nastier relations. They’re meant to keep people the fuck out and make sure they have no interest in returning.”

“They definitely work,” Harry said, and was glad to note that his voice didn’t sound so raspy anymore. He peered up at Malfoy. “But they didn’t work on you.”

“I’m Marked,” Malfoy said. “They’re only meant to keep out anyone who isn’t. On the bright side, however, those wards mean we’re not dealing with a Bellatrix house. She liked to set up wards that lured people in.” He watched Harry carefully for a moment, his grey eyes softer than Harry had seen them before. “I really am sorry about that. It was stupid of me to not check.”

“It’s fine,” Harry said, a little thrown and sort of uncomfortable by how forthcoming Malfoy’s apologies were. And anyhow, he was still a little shaky and being upset about the wards seemed like too much effort. “Highly unpleasant but no harm done. Really, I’ve been through worse.”

“That I don’t doubt,” Malfoy said with a faint smile. “Wait there. It’ll take me a few minutes to disable them.”

He stepped through the gate and turned back to face it, wand in hand, and stood with his feet braced against the bricks as he cast charm after charm, his eyes narrowed and brow furrowed in concentration, his mouth pressed into a grimly determined line. His wand swished and flicked as quick and fluid as any conductor’s baton, and he held his left arm extended as well, the fingers plucking at the air like a harp. He looked powerful and capable and confident, and a low thrum of desire vibrated through Harry’s chest. He looked away and sipped more water.

A few minutes later, Malfoy stepped back through the gate. “I think that should do it.” He reached a hand down to help Harry up, and then plucked the empty cup from his hand and Transfigured it back into his pocket watch.

Harry glanced at him. “That *should* do it?” he repeated. “You mean you’re not sure?”

Malfoy bit at his lower lip and glanced back at the gate. “It can be hard to tell. Sometimes there are secondary wards buried deep. But I’m fairly certain I got them all. Just, take it slow.”

All right, then. Harry sucked in a deep breath and stepped onto the brick path. His skin prickled in apprehension but he couldn’t tell if that came from him or from the wards. Another step, another, and another. He turned back to find Malfoy watching him anxiously.

“I feel fine,” he said, relieved.

Malfoy let out a deep breath. “Good. Come along, then.”

Harry followed him up the rest of the path to the three shallow steps that led up to the porch. There, Malfoy cast another set of spells before climbing them and crossing the creaking wooden boards to the front door.

“Never touch the front door,” he said as he cast an Alohomora and then flicked his wand again and a big red X appeared on the door. Another flick and it swung open. “Don’t touch the knob, don’t brush against the jamb, don’t step on the threshold.” He stepped over it and into the house.

“How do you know? You didn’t cast anything,” Harry said as he followed Malfoy into the entryway.

“I didn’t need to. The front door is always trapped, because what is someone most likely to touch first? The knob, the knocker, the threshold, the door itself.” Malfoy turned and cast three spells that sparked blue and then one that sparked red. “Ah-ha,” he said, then turned and spelled large red Xs onto the windows of the entryway. “If you were to touch the door, the instant you cleared it the windows would implode and the shards of glass would fly to you like metal filings to a magnet.”

“Nasty,” Harry said. He shuffled a bit further from the door. “Aren’t you going to disable that?”

“No time. The first thing I have to do in every house is check for a time bomb.” Malfoy cast a few more spells before stepping cautiously into the adjoining sitting room. “Some houses have a spell that’s set to go off after the house is breached. It’s always ten minutes and clearly marked if you know what to look for. So we search for that, then come back to the beginning and work our way through.”

Harry trailed after him, taking care to follow along the path that Malfoy’s shoes made on the dusty boards. Like the outside of the house, the inside looked undeniably abandoned. White sheets draped the sparse furniture, and a heavy layer of dust coated everything. Cobwebs stretched in the corners and along the wainscoting, and the light that filtered in through the grime-coated windows was weak and dull. After a few more showers of blue sparks, Malfoy continued into a formal dining room, and from there into a kitchen.

In the kitchen, he took the time to cast a number of spells over the cabinets and floor before he turned his attention to a door standing ajar. A flick of his wand had it swinging open on groaning hinges to reveal a steep set of stairs descending into darkness.

“Here,” Malfoy said, pointing at the top step where someone had gouged three long furrows into the stone. “This means step over every third stair.” He swished his wand and lights flickered on down in the cellar. Another swish and a red X appeared on every third step.

“What happens if I don’t?” Harry asked.

“You take a very unpleasant shortcut down to the bottom.”

They made their way down to the cellar, hopping awkwardly over the marked steps. Grit crunched beneath their shoes as they walked over the concrete floor. Malfoy passed by a small room set off to one side without sparing it a glance, and Harry hesitated outside it. It was small, only about five feet wide by seven deep, and dimly lit, but he thought he saw… something. Way in the back.

“Hey, you missed this,” Harry called after Malfoy, and started to step through the doorway to take a look inside to see what was in there.

“No!” Malfoy shouted and lunged for him.

Surprised, Harry twisted in his grasp and stumbled back, losing his balance and taking Malfoy down with him. They hit the floor hard, Harry on the bottom, Malfoy’s elbow knocking the wind from his lungs. The door slammed shut behind them with a sharp bang that echoed like a gunshot in the small room. Malfoy shoved himself off Harry and hit the door hard, pounding both hands against it. Harry finally managed to drag in a painful breath and pushed himself to his feet.

“Oh fuck, oh no, no.” He hit it again. “Fuck!” Malfoy kicked the door and turned to Harry, eyes wide and grim. “We’re trapped.”

“But can’t we just…” Harry raised his wand to cast an Alohomora.

“No!” Malfoy shouted and slapped Harry’s hand down so hard he nearly lost his grip on his wand. “No magic.” He pressed his hands to his eyes. “We’re trapped, no magic. Fuck.” His voice wobbled alarmingly.

“Malfoy?” Harry asked quietly. The queasy realization that somehow he’d screwed up royally pooled in his gut. “You’re frightening me. What’s going on?”

“What’s going on,” Malfoy said gently, “is that we’re fucked. Utterly fucked and probably dead.” He sighed. “I told you, I *fucking told you* not to walk anywhere I didn’t walk, and I did not walk in here because *here* is a great big fucking trap. There’s a marking on the doorjamb that says so.” He didn’t raise his voice at all, just sounded tired and resigned, and that scared Harry all the more.

“Sorry, I thought I saw…” Harry glanced to the far corner where he thought he’d seen something. There was nothing there. He turned back to Malfoy. “So… what’s going to happen?”

“This is an oven trap. Depending on how fast it’s set to go, it’s going to heat up a little at a time and then in anywhere between two and six hours we’re going to bake to death.”

“So can’t we just spell our way out?” Harry looked around at the bare cinderblock walls. They could probably blast right through them with a few well-placed Reductor spells.

“That’s the beauty of it. The inside of this room is laid with a magic-siphoning net. Anything we cast gets absorbed into the spell, and the room just heats up that much faster. We’ll broil before we break through it.”

Malfoy looked entirely too calm for someone convinced he was about to die. “But you can disable it, right?” Harry prompted.

“Of course I can,” Malfoy said, and pointed at the door. “From out there.” He sighed and his hand dropped. “I should have just let you walk in and then opened it up again. I have no idea what I was thinking. I’m sorry, Harry.”

Malfoy’s use of his given name lit Harry’s tension into a sharp flash of panic that made his lungs ache. “No,” he said, quashing the urge to let himself slip into a flailing, gibbering wreck. “No. I haven’t lived through all that shit with Voldemort just to die like *this*. That’s not going to happen. There has to be some way out of here.”

Malfoy sighed. “There’s nothing we can do. The door is sealed. We can’t use magic. By the time anyone notices that we’re missing or thinks to look for us, it’ll be too late.”

“By the time…” Harry repeated as a great shining thread of hope rose up before him. He lunged for it. “It’s Friday,” he said, and grinned as the panic faded. “Malfoy, it’s Friday!”

Malfoy stared at him as if he’d come entirely unhinged. “Yes, it is Friday,” he agreed carefully.

“No no no, it’s *Friday*. Friday is pub night! Every Friday I go to the pub with Ron!” Harry said, and he could tell from the spark in Malfoy’s eyes that he’d caught on. “I never miss pub night and I’m never ever late without sending him a message. Once I don’t show up, and he works out that I’m off with you somewhere, he’s bound to track us down.”

Malfoy had his pocket watch out. “It’s just past four now. What time do you usually meet him?”

“If we don’t catch each other at the Ministry, we meet at the pub at six sharp,” Harry told him. “That’s still in our window of safety. So, all we have to do now is wait.”

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An hour later, according to the pocket watch, Draco had settled on one of the Carrows as being responsible for this house. Both Amycus and Alecto were particularly fond of that imploding window curse he’d found on the door, an affection that Draco absolutely did not share. What if one of them had actually needed a safe house? Were they supposed to stumble in only to find a shredded body stretched across the entryway like a welcome mat? Really, the point of the traps was to keep people out and keep the house safe, all of which could easily be done without resorting to Dark Arts. After all, Draco had been responsible for setting up his own share of safe houses, and he’d effectively secured all of them without the potential for bloodshed that all of the others had seemed to relish. At the time he’d felt that his lack of enthusiasm for blood and viscera made him a terrible Death Eater.

It hadn’t taken him long to find his peace with that.

Across the narrow room, Harry heaved a huge sigh and stood. He stretched briefly, arms raised high above his head, and his shirt rode up to expose a small strip of pale abdomen. He dropped his arms, rolled his shoulders, and then began yet another slow and careful circuit of the room, searching its perimeter inch by inch for a way out that didn’t exist. For a moment, Draco nearly gave in to the impulse to snap at him to bloody well *sit down* and *quit fidgeting*, but he wrestled it back under control with some effort. He understood the urge to do *something*, even if there was nothing to be done. And as satisfying as a screaming match might feel in the short term, it wouldn’t do them any favors in the long run. They still had well over an hour until Harry missed his meeting with Weasley, and it would pass easier if Draco did his best to remain civil.

Draco blamed his fraying temper on the heat. He and Potter had both removed their heavy Auror robes almost immediately, but the temperature had risen since then, the air growing oppressively hot and muggy. Draco pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his damp brow before tucking it away again. He glanced at Potter, who crouched down to inspect something in the corner, and felt a surge of envy at Potter’s stupid tee-shirt and his stupid bare arms. Draco’s cuffs remained firmly buttoned at his wrists.

Potter sighed again and stood, rubbing a hand over his sweaty forehead. “Time is it?” he muttered.

Draco pulled out his pocket watch. “Nearly five.” He snapped it shut again with a click.

Potter heaved yet another sigh and Draco very nearly told him to stuff it, but then Potter muttered “Fuck it,” as he grabbed the hem of his shirt and yanked it over his head in one smooth motion.

Draco’s words crumbled to dust in his mouth as Potter toed off his shoes, peeled off his socks and then reached for his belt. Draco shut his eyes, but he couldn’t block out the soft jangle and clink of Potter’s belt buckle coming undone, the faint rasp of his zip lowering, the rustle of his trousers coming off and the soft *whump* as they hit the floor where he dropped them. He listened for further sounds of disrobing, but only heard Potter settle back down on the makeshift cushion of his folded Auror robes.

Draco was now trapped in a very small room with a mostly-naked Harry Potter. A mostly-naked and rather sweaty Harry Potter. What the hell would he do now? He couldn’t sit here for the next hour with his eyes shut, and he couldn’t open them without looking at Potter. Mostly-naked Potter. Mostly-naked sweaty Potter sitting just a few feet away.

It hit him a few seconds later how ridiculous he was being. He was more than capable of controlling himself, right? And what the hell, there was a good chance that they would die here. There were certainly worse ways to go than staring at Harry Potter with his clothes off. Draco mumbled a mental ‘Fuck it,’ of his own and let his eyes open.

Well.

Well, fuck.

Draco groped for his mask, schooling his features into a carefully neutral expression on blind instinct alone, because it turned out he was *utterly* unprepared for this. Potter was still on the thin side, his collarbones prominent and hipbones still easily visible above the waistband of his underpants—light blue and decorated with little fluttering snitches, they were the most ridiculous thing Draco had ever seen—but life as an Auror had put a layer of muscle on his skinny frame, offering a faint definition to his abs and biceps. And Potter’s knees hadn’t changed at all. Still just as knobbly as they’d been at Hogwarts, with a faint half-moon scar on the left one from some childhood accident. Draco had liked them then and he found that he still liked them now. They made Potter more likable, more human. More than those stupid glasses or that ridiculous hair, Draco had always found this flaw marvelously endearing.

He flinched when Potter suddenly let his head thunk back against the wall behind him. “Why is this even a thing?” he demanded out of nowhere. “I mean, what’s the *point*? Why not just kill us straight off?”

It was sort of ridiculous for Potter to even ask that; the Dark Lord’s flair for the dramatic was the only reason Potter had escaped him so many times and ultimately ended up beating him. “The Dark Lord was bugfuck mad, I believe we agreed,” Draco said, and felt a surge of accomplishment at how light and careless his voice sounded.

Potter shoved a hand through his sweat-dampened hair, and Draco wanted to touch it. “Hasn’t he tormented me enough?”

That struck Draco as funny, coming from the person who’d been driving *him* mad for over a decade now. Potter had always been able to get to him in a way that no one else had ever come close to. He’d always provoked a physical, almost visceral response in Draco. He remembered how at Hogwarts the urge to punch Potter’s teeth in would rise up, so heady and strong that Draco nearly drowned in it. Now Potter evoked a different response in him, though no less potent and no less physical, one that still involved Potter’s mouth, only now—

“Er, Malfoy? Are you all right there? You’re, um, staring at me…”

Draco blinked and came back to himself, only to realize that his gaze had slid to… oh, fuck. He could feel his face flaming as he wrenched his eyes away from the soft swell of Potter’s bollocks beneath the thin fabric of his underpants.

“What on earth are you wearing?” he asked, burying his mortification in outright condescendence.

“What, these?” Potter glanced down at his lap. “Oh. Don’t judge me. They were a gift from my, erm, from… someone who found them funny. And I haven’t done my laundry in a while so they were all I had.”

“They’re ridiculous,” Draco said and risked another peek. A little gold snitch darted across the faint outline of Potter’s cock and he averted his eyes again.

“Well it’s not like I thought anyone was going to see them,” Potter muttered petulantly. Then, “What time is it?”

Draco sighed and took out his pocket watch again, glad for a harmless place to pin his gaze. “Just past five.”

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Malfoy had fallen into the habit of checking his pocket watch roughly every five minutes. Harry recognized it as a sort of nervous gesture, not that Malfoy would ever call it that, clicking the watch open and shut with small sharp movements. Every time he did, he announced the time to Harry. At five-twenty, Malfoy had finally given in to the heat and taken off his waistcoat, shoes, and socks, and Harry had spent his time since then staring at Malfoy’s feet.

When Harry was in grade school, he vaguely recalled one of his teachers talking about how in Victorian times ladies didn’t dare show their ankles. Harry always thought that was stupid because, so what? It’s just an ankle, and who the fuck cares about ankles? Well, now he

understood because he couldn't stop staring at Malfoy's feet and ankles despite the thoroughly unreasonable curls of desire they raised in him.

Malfoy's feet matched the rest of him: pale, thin, and entirely aristocratic, with high arches and long toes. It was the toes that really caught Harry's attention. His second toe was just the slightest bit longer than his great toe, and just the tiniest bit crooked, the last joint curving the slightest bit toward his middle toes. Somehow this small flaw on his otherwise perfect feet made Harry like them all the more.

And his ankles, oh god, his ankles. Slender and well-formed, the knobbed ends of his tibia and fibula standing out smooth and round, and Harry wanted to lick them. And the skin there was even paler than on his hands and face, so pale that he could make out the faint blue tracing of a vein curving delicately over the bone. And Harry wanted to lick that too.

Harry slid his fingers beneath his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. He was sitting here contemplating Malfoy's well-formed ankles—and he was pretty sure he'd never described anything as 'well-formed' in his entire life—and this urge to *lick* them? If this wasn't a sign that the heat had begun to boil his brain, he honestly didn't know what would be.

Across the room, Malfoy clicked open his watch again and announced, "It's five-thirty."

He studied the face of the watch for a few more seconds, as if expecting it to change on him, then tucked the watch away and mopped at his brow with his handkerchief. He'd been doing that nearly as often as looking at the watch and the small scrap of linen had to be soaked through by now. Malfoy looked absolutely miserable, with sweat darkening his hair from platinum to a bland and unremarkable blond, and damp patches had appeared on his shirt. Just looking at him made Harry feel hotter.

"Take it off, Malfoy," he said.

Malfoy's head jerked up. "What are you on about?"

"Your shirt," Harry said. "Just take it off. I don't care that you're Marked."

Malfoy's face shuttered. "It's not that simple."

"It is too that simple," he insisted. "It's hot, you're miserable. You'll be slightly less miserable if you take off your bloody shirt." Harry paused and gazed back evenly as Malfoy stared him down. "I can keep my eyes shut if that'll help."

Malfoy stared at him for a few seconds longer before he exhaled slowly. "That won't be necessary." He sounded defeated.

Slowly, he stood and took off his trousers, revealing long, pale legs and a pair of blue underpants that perfectly matched the rest of his outfit. It amused Harry that apparently Malfoy coordinated his clothing down to his underthings, though he found he wasn't surprised in the least. Malfoy worked open the buttons of his shirt with hesitant fingers, and it fell open to reveal a white undershirt that had gone semi-transparent with perspiration. He

froze, hands clutching the plackets of his shirt, and visibly steeled himself to shrug out of it. He dropped it on the floor beside his trousers and sat back down.

Harry tried to keep from looking at his arm, but it was like trying to avoid thinking of elephants. His eyes strayed to it despite his intentions. And rather than the ugly black Mark against pale skin he expected to see, Malfoy's inner forearm was shiny and pink with rippled scar tissue.

Harry was across the room and crouching beside him before he could think to stop himself. "What the fuck did he do to you?"

Malfoy started to hide his arm with his right hand, then sighed and offered it to Harry in half a shrug. "He didn't do this to me. I did this to myself."

Carefully, Harry caught his wrist and turned it for a better look, and the tips of his fingers slid over the scarred skin. It felt smooth and a little stiff, sort of like leather, and the Mark lurked indistinct but dark and menacing beneath it. "It looks burned?" He darted a glance up to Malfoy's face but found him staring at the opposite wall, jaw clenched.

"It is."

Harry let go of his wrist and Malfoy folded his arm over his belly, hiding his inner forearm from view. "What happened?" Harry asked softly.

Malfoy went silent for a nearly a minute, his gaze pinned on the wall across from them. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and tense. "After the war, I wanted it gone, I wanted it *off* me. I researched, consulted every Healer that would see me, and researched some more, and came up with nothing. One night I was drunk and desperate and… well, mostly I was very drunk. And I don't know what happened, I just snapped. I covered the rest of my arm with an Impervius, doused the Mark with my father's best whisky, and cast the strongest Incendio I could." He went silent for a few beats. "A house-elf put me out."

The entirely inappropriate urge to laugh swelled in his lungs, and Harry fought it down by clearing his throat in a little half-cough. "A house-elf," he repeated.

Malfoy finally looked over at him and raised his eyebrows. "They're very loyal creatures, you know."

He sounded so prissy that Harry had to cough again to fight down another laugh. He had absolutely no desire whatsoever to find out what Malfoy would do to him if he laughed now. "Er, yes. They, um. They really are."

Malfoy watched him carefully for a moment, then looked down at his arm with a sigh. "It's a little ironic. The Healers told me I was lucky I didn't lose function in my hand, hell, that I didn't lose my whole arm. When all that Dark Magic in the Mark protected itself, it also protected me from my own stupidity."

Harry swallowed. He felt he should say something. Something comforting and reassuring, like 'We all make mistakes,' or 'You were young,' or 'I don't blame you.'

What came out instead was, “Did it hurt?”

Malfoy looked up at him again, and that familiar expression on his face, one part condescending and two parts disbelief that Harry could *possibly* be such an imbecile, reassured Harry more than maybe it should that Malfoy was all right.

“Potter,” he said in his talking-to-idiots voice. “I set myself on fire. Of course it hurt.”

Harry looked away. “Sorry, dumb question.”

Malfoy sighed again. “It’s not so bad. Like I said, the Mark protected me from the worst of it. It’s just ugly, but that’s not so bad either. It’s not like I’d let anyone see it.”

“You’ve let me see it,” Harry pointed out and immediately wanted to pick up one of his socks and stuff it into his mouth so he would stop saying such stupid things.

Malfoy glared at him but it lacked any real anger. “Yes, well, you always had to be different.” He paused. “And there’s a chance we’re both about to die so it might not even matter.”

“We’re not going to die. I don’t know how to die, remember?” Harry said, but Malfoy had pinned his eyes back on the wall opposite them. Harry waited for him to say something but he didn’t. “It doesn’t matter to me,” he offered after the silence had stretched unbearably.

“Lovely. Saint Potter is unaffected by my disfigurement,” Malfoy said. He didn’t quite sneer, but it was a near thing.

“I don’t know why you thought I would be. I mean, I knew about your Mark. And this, well. It’s just. I’m not surprised or anything.” Oh god, what was *wrong* with him? Out of all the stupid things… “That came out wrong. I mean…” But he didn’t really know what he meant, only that he wanted to make Malfoy see that it was all okay and he really didn’t *care* about a bit of scarring. And he had no idea how to do that.

“Ah yes, you’re not surprised. And why would you be?” Now Malfoy was definitely sneering. “This is just what I do, isn’t it? Throw my life away one bit at a time?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Harry insisted helplessly.

“Of course not,” Malfoy said, and the irritation drained from his face, replaced by that bland look, that perfectly expressionless mask that Harry hated. Even Malfoy’s features twisted up in distaste or hostility or outrage or any of the other expressions he fell into all too easily were better than this blank *nothing*.

“My aunt and uncle hated me,” Harry blurted out. “They hated my parents, they hated magic, and they hated me. They forced me to work for them, to do all the cooking and cleaning, and if I did it wrong or too slow they’d lock me up in my cupboard.”

“Your cupboard?” Draco stared at him. That mask was definitely gone now; he was gaping openly.

“Yes, the cupboard under the stairs. That’s where I used to sleep.” His stomach twisted at the memory and he looked down to find that he’d clenched his hands into fists. “They didn’t give me a room of my own until after I got my Hogwarts letter, and only then because they were afraid of me, with the magic. And I’d grown too big to really fit in my cupboard anymore.”

“Fucking hell, Potter, why are you telling me this?” Malfoy demanded. He sounded half-panicked.

Harry shrugged and wouldn’t meet his eyes. He didn’t want to see the pity there, probably the same pity he’d shown that had kept Malfoy looking at the wall. “I know your secret, seems only fair that you should know one of mine.”

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll go to the *Prophet* with it?”

“You won’t.”

Malfoy went silent for a moment. “I won’t,” he agreed, then, “You know, it wasn’t a fair trade.”

Harry risked a glance at Malfoy and found that he was regarding him uncertainly. “What?”

“You secret is much bigger than mine. I mean, mine…” He raised his scarred arm with a flourish. “Draco Malfoy makes another poor decision. Alert the press!” He rolled his eyes. “But the Boy Who Lived had an abusive childhood? He was locked up in a bloody cupboard?”

“We really don’t have to talk about this anymore.” It was probably a mistake to bring it up in the first place. But Harry had wanted to make Malfoy feel better. He had no idea what the fuck he’d been thinking.

“My father never hit me,” Malfoy said, jerking Harry out of his thoughts. “He wouldn’t dirty his hands with something so *Muggle* as physical abuse. He favored a well-placed Stinging Hex when I was younger, and when I reached Hogwarts he used to Crucio me. Never for more than a second or two at a time, and not often enough to risk any sort of permanent damage. He felt it appropriately conveyed his displeasure with me, and had the added advantage of preparing me to not embarrass him when the Dark Lord inevitably struck me with the same curse. Which he did, more often than I care to remember.”

Malfoy spoke evenly, almost emotionlessly, and when he finished he raised his eyebrows at Harry in an expression that clearly dared him to comment.

So Harry didn’t. “They’d starve me too,” he said instead, and Malfoy’s eyes lit with a sudden understanding that Harry wasn’t sure he liked. “I think that’s why I’m not very tall. At least, not as tall as I probably should be. My dad was very tall, over six feet, but I’m only five-ten. I sort of wish I was taller. As tall as I’m supposed to be, I mean.”

“That’s…” Draco began, and stopped. He sucked in a deep breath. “The most trouble I ever got in was for reading a book in my fourth year. I’d swiped it off one of the younger Ravenclaws. Edgar Allan Poe. I made the mistake of bringing it home for the holidays and

my father found it. I honestly couldn't tell if he was more upset that I was reading poetry written by a Muggle or written by an American." He laughed a little at that. "And you're not *that* short. I've only got two inches on you."

Harry barely heard it over the way his heart pounded. "I had a forbidden book too," he breathed. He hadn't thought of it in years, but it all came rushing back. "It's *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White. Dudley got it as a birthday gift from a friend who only bought it because it had a sword on the cover. Once my aunt and uncle found out it was about Merlin and magic, they threw it away."

Harry remembered lugging the trash bin out to the curb, his slight eight-year-old frame struggling with the weight. How it tipped over and the rubbish came spilling out. How the sidewalk pavement was cold and rough against his knees as he scrabbled around, picking it all up, and how he found the paperback, still pristine aside from a small stain where some of Aunt Petunia's used tea leaves had landed on it. How he'd tucked it into the waistband of his pants, glad for the first and only time for how baggy Dudley's cast-off clothing hung on him, because his loose shirt more than covered the rectangular bulge at his waist.

He'd begun reading it that night, crouched in his cupboard with the door cracked just wide enough to let in a wedge of light that illuminated exactly three lines, no more, no less. He read quickly, nervously, slowly sliding the book higher so the light fell on the next lines and the next, holding his breath each time he turned a page, terrified of being caught.

"I've read it dozens and dozens of times. I think I identified a more than a little with Wart. I used to pretend that someday I'd be someone important and famous and powerful too." He gave a slight laugh. "Never thought it'd actually happen, mind. Not in a million years."

"Did you get caught, too?" Malfoy asked.

Harry shook his head. "Never. I kept it stashed under the lowest stair. It's probably still there, come to think of it."

The conversation continued, half competition, half confessional, completely bizarre.

Malfoy told him how he was punished every time Hermione ("A worthless mudblood, according to my father.") got better marks than he did.

Harry admitted his fear of the dark ("The total, absolute, can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face sort of dark.") that was probably born in that cupboard under the stairs, and how he had to sleep with his curtains open at night even to this day.

Malfoy admitted to a deathly fear of hippogriffs ("It's why I carried on like I did with Hagrid's beast. I thought if I acted like I was terribly injured it'd make up for the fact that I'd screamed like a girl.") and that he still wouldn't go near them.

Harry talked a little about how much he hated the papers reporting on every insignificant detail of his life, and how after the war ended he'd been naïve enough to believe that he could finally stop being the Boy Who Lived and just be Harry.

Malfoy talked more about his frustration with his parents constantly pressuring him to marry, and how he hated to disappoint his mother but for the first time in his life he was putting himself above their ambitions for him. He talked a little about his tensions with his father, and from the way he spoke, Malfoy didn't have any problem disappointing him.

Harry said that he still had nightmares sometimes, the awful sort where he woke up screaming and clammy with sweat. Malfoy said he still had those too.

Some of the things they admitted were trivial. Harry told Malfoy that Chocolate Frogs were the first Wizarding candy he'd ever eaten and to this day he still added to his collection of Chocolate Frog Cards. Malfoy told him that he liked the envelope glue flavored Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans the best. Harry told him that was disgusting, and Malfoy had only laughed and said, "Probably."

They went on and on, and Harry found himself struck again and again by just how bloody weird it was that it felt this good to let Malfoy of all people know all of these deeply personal things, some of which even Ron and Hermione didn't know. And to have Malfoy confessing just as much? To jump into this blind pit of vulnerability and have Malfoy jump right along with him? The surreality of it all made his head spin.

"I was twenty the first time I had sex," Harry admitted forty minutes later.

"I still haven't," Malfoy said.

Harry forgot all about telling Malfoy that he was gay, his next confession. "You haven't?" He frowned. "By choice?"

Malfoy fixed him with an incredulous scowl. "Potter, I'm a twenty-four year old man. Do you honestly think it's by choice?"

Harry could feel his cheeks warming further despite the heat of the room. "But surely you could… I mean, you're—" He bit his tongue to keep from finishing that sentence aloud. Even miserable with the heat, face blotchy pink and his sweaty hair plastered to his head, Malfoy was beautiful. "Um, you're not unattractive," he finished lamely.

"Thanks for that, Potter," he said dryly. "But I'm also a Death Eater. It's not as if anyone's queuing up to hop into bed with me."

I would, Harry thought. And then decided, what the hell. He'd already told Malfoy everything else, every other embarrassing, painful, personal thing in his life, how much of a difference could this make? Just say it, just tell him: Malfoy, I'm gay and I would.

Harry swallowed, his mouth suddenly gone dry. His heart pounded and his stomach fluttered. "Malfoy," he said. "I'm—"

"Shh!"

A wave of disappointed confusion crashed through Harry before it registered that Malfoy had leapt to his feet and thrown himself at the door. Then he was momentarily distracted by the

view of Malfoy's arse, pert and round and separated from Harry by only the thin fabric of his blue pants. "What?"

"Shut up!" Malfoy said, pressing his ear to the door. Then a wide grin split his face. He pounded on the door. "Down here!" he screamed. "We're down here!"

And then Harry heard it too. Footfalls overhead, crossing over the ceiling through the kitchen, and then the creaking door and pounding down the stairs. Harry flung himself up as well.

"Harry? Malfoy?"

"Ron!" he shouted and had never in his life been so bloody happy to hear his friend's voice. "Ron, thank god!"

"Save your swooning until we're actually out of here, Potter," Malfoy snapped, then raised his voice. "Weasley, no magic!"

"What?"

"No magic," Malfoy repeated. "We're trapped in here and it's slowly baking us to death. If you use magic to try and force the door, we're going to die. No magic. Got it?"

"No magic, right. So what should I do?" Ron's voice came.

"There's a spell to open the door, right Malfoy? Isn't that what you said?" Harry put in.

"Right, just tell me what it is and I'll have you out."

"I can tell you the incantation but it's useless without the wand movements." Malfoy said. He scrubbed a frustrated hand through his hair.

"So describe it to me," Ron told him.

"It's complicated."

"So describe it to me in detail." Harry could practically hear Ron rolling his eyes.

Malfoy turned to Harry and extended his index finger. "This is the movement," he said, and swept his finger down sharply before looping it up, then down again in a peculiar corkscrewing motion that ended in a twisting jab.

"Uh, Ron? He just showed me the movement. You're not going to get this from a description." Harry's hopes sank. What good was it that Ron had come, only to be completely unable to actually help them?

"Who else knows the spell?" Ron called through the door.

"Any Death Eater could do it."

Panic swelled in Harry's belly. "There's no time for him to go fetch one from Azkaban. The paperwork alone will…"

"He's going to have to go get one that isn't in Azkaban, then," Malfoy said. He looked pained. "Weasley," he called. "You're going to have to go get my father."

A beat of silence, then, "Will he even listen to me?"

"Just be sure to mention that his only son and heir is in *imminent danger of dying*," Malfoy snapped. "That should make the appropriate impression of this situation's urgency, don't you think?" He scowled at the door as if his stare could pierce it and skewer Ron where he stood.

"Right. Going, now." Ron's words were followed shortly by the sharp crack of Apparition.

Malfoy turned away from the door and snatched up his trousers. He shoved one leg, then the other into them and fumbled with the fly. He glared at Harry. "Get dressed."

But Harry was too busy staring at Malfoy's side as he bent over to collect discarded clothing from the floor. There was a dark shape down the ribs on his left side, faintly visible through his damp undershirt. A bruise? Harry couldn't recall him favoring his ribs at all, and he certainly hadn't been on any dangerous cases. "There's—" he began, and broke off when Malfoy hurled his jeans at him.

"I told you to get dressed," he snapped. "My father will be here any minute and the last thing I need is for him to find me next best thing to naked with you. He's already half-convinced I'm a homosexual because I won't marry. I don't need you giving him any more ideas."

The disgust in Malfoy's voice cut Harry deep, and he suddenly found himself relieved he'd kept that particular secret to himself. "Fine," he said and shoved one leg into his trousers.

They finished dressing in silence, the easy intimacy of the past forty-five minutes gone as if it had never existed. That had been Draco talking. This here was all Malfoy. And Malfoy was just as closed off and distant as he had ever been. Harry sighed, and Malfoy scowled at him for it. Yes, definitely back to normal.

The few minutes after he'd finished dressing passed slowly. The air had grown brutally hot and clothing made it nearly unbearable. A drop of sweat tickled its way down Harry's sternum and another slid down the small of his back. Harry couldn't help fidgeting and pulling at his clothes. Through it all, Malfoy stood stoically before the door, tension radiating off him in waves so strong that Harry could almost feel it prickling at his skin.

And then came footsteps overhead, and down the stairs, and then Ron's muffled voice saying, "Just in there."

Even though he hadn't heard it in years, not since the trials, Harry recognized Lucius' voice instantly as he cast the spell to unlock the door. I am not intimidated, he told himself and straightened. Malfoy's posture had gone even more rigid, which Harry hadn't thought possible, and then the door swung open and let in a sweet draft of cool air. He threw himself

through the doorway on Malfoy's heels and sucked in breath after deep breath of gloriously fresh air.

Ron flinched back from the blast of heat that wafted from the trap room. Lucius had already moved well away from it.

"Draco," he said, completely ignoring Harry. "I suppose this hasn't convinced you either, has it?"

Malfoy's expression had shut down again. "I'm not having this conversation with you here. No," he interrupted himself. "I'm not having this conversation with you at all."

Lucius looked down his long nose and his lip curled. "I'll not have you needlessly risking your life—"

"It's not needless! It's my bloody job!" Malfoy cut him off. "And right now the regulations of my job say that I'm required to report to St. Mungo's for treatment immediately following an incident. So if you'll excuse me."

"And what am I going to tell your mother?"

"Tell her that I'll see her on Sunday," Malfoy said, and Disapparated.

"I, um, I'd like to thank you for getting us out of there," Harry said into the awkward silence that followed Malfoy's abrupt departure.

Lucius turned to face him and pinned him with a chilly stare. "I can assure you, Mr. Potter, that if it had just been you I wouldn't have bothered to come." And he Disapparated too.

"Well," Ron said. "They're just a lovely family, aren't they?"

Harry thought of the dozens of little secrets and insights about his father that Malfoy had confided in him, and Malfoy's tension and sudden waspishness made sense. "They're complicated," he said. "Come on, Side-Along me to St. Mungo's? Let's get this over with."

Chapter 5

The check up at St. Mungo's went much quicker than Harry thought it would. It still involved an unnecessary amount of poking and prodding, and of course all the fussing and fawning by the Healers and Mediwitches. But eventually they pronounced him hale and healthy, albeit somewhat dehydrated, and after administering a Hydrating Potion they sent him on his way.

"I expect you'll be going home?" Ron asked as they walked down the corridor back to the main entrance.

"Home?" Harry echoed. "You're joking, right? After the shit I went through today I'm not going to have to buy myself a drink all night, and with that Hydrating thing they gave me I figure I've got a better chance than usual to avoid a hangover." He grinned.

"If you're sure, then, mate," Ron said, but he grinned back. "You're lucky Hermione had to pull a double shift tonight so she won't be around to fuss at you for not going straight home and resting."

"That's a shame, I was looking forward to seeing her tonight," Harry said as they turned the final corner and emerged into the bustling entry room. "Though it's probably best that she's not going to be there to cluck over me. I just want to relax and… Oh."

He broke off as he spotted a familiar head of blond hair lingering near the door. Malfoy was still here? And he seemed to be waiting. At that moment, Malfoy caught sight of him and raised his hand in a little half-wave and made his way through the sparse crowd to meet them.

"What are you still doing here?" Harry asked. "I'd have thought you'd leave as soon as they let you."

"I just wanted to make certain that you were all right," Malfoy said stiffly, but his eyes were uncertain.

"Mildly dehydrated but otherwise fine," Harry said. "They gave me something for it."

Malfoy nodded. "Same here." He paused. "Right, then. I suppose I'll see you Monday." He began to turn away.

"Malfoy, wait," Harry said, jogging a couple of steps to catch him. "It's Friday."

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Malfoy's mouth as he turned back around. "Yes, Potter, I believe we've established that it is in fact Friday."

"And Friday's pub night," Harry finished with a smile. "Do you think you might want to come along?"

Ron's head whipped around and he stared at Harry as if he'd lost his mind. "What are you—Ow!" he broke off as Harry elbowed him in the ribs.

Malfoy gave Ron a pointed look. “Thanks for the invitation, but I get the impression I wouldn’t be welcome.”

“I’d like you to come,” Harry insisted, then paused to marvel at the truth of his words. He really did want to spend more time with Malfoy. “Besides, we’ve got a tradition where if you’ve nearly died that week, the others have you buy your drinks for the night. You should come.”

“I…” Malfoy’s brows drew down and together. “I suppose I will. Just for a little while, though.”

Harry couldn’t help the smile that spread over his face. “Great! We go to the Red Oak. Do you know it? It’s down on the dodgy end of Diagon.”

“I’ve seen it,” Malfoy said with a small nod.

Harry kept smiling. “Good. I’m going to go home and get cleaned up, and we’ll meet you there?”

“Sounds fine.”

“Mate,” Ron said as Malfoy walked away. “What the hell are you doing?”

Harry glanced up at his friend as they made their way to the bank of Floos on the left wall of the lobby. “Inviting Malfoy out with us. He’s an Auror, he’s my partner, he nearly died right along with me. Why shouldn’t he come?” It came out more defensive than he’d intended.

They both stepped through the Floo, one after the other, and emerged into Harry’s living room.

“How about the fact that he’s Malfoy? And possibly a murderer?” Ron asked as Harry paused to brush ash from his robes.

Harry rolled his eyes and he headed for his bedroom, Ron trailing along after him. “He didn’t kill anyone,” he insisted.

He went straight for the bathroom and twisted both knobs in the shower to full. While waiting for it to heat, he stripped off his sweat-dampened clothes and dropped them on the floor beside the bath mat.

“You can’t know that for sure,” Ron called from the bedroom.

“I do know that for sure. Look, he could have killed me today if he’d wanted to,” Harry called back and stuck his hand in to test the water. Finding it warm enough, he stepped under the spray.

Once the rustle of the shower curtain signaled that Harry had gone in, Ron came into the bathroom and perched on the counter by the sink. Seven years of sharing a dormitory and a tent with Ron hadn’t instilled much of a sense of modesty in either of them, to Hermione’s ongoing exasperation.

“I stumbled into that trap like an idiot,” Harry continued as he let the spray soak his hair. “He jumped after me, trying to keep me from setting it off.” He popped the cap off his shampoo and poured a small puddle into his palm. “It would have been the easiest thing to just let me start casting and bake myself and pretend he had nothing to do with it.”

“He couldn’t have gotten away with it, not this soon after Parsons. He’s smarter than that,” Ron pointed out.

“Well, look at it this way, then. He didn’t kill me after he spent the better part of two hours trapped in an oven with me.” Harry massaged the shampoo into his hair.

“That must have been awful. For you, I mean.”

“It wasn’t, really,” Harry said. “It was sort of awkward, sometimes.” He hesitated, weighing how much of what had happened in there with Malfoy he should pass along to Ron. Then decided, what the hell. If he could open up as much as he had with Malfoy, then he could certainly tell his best friend about it. “We were in our underpants for most of it.”

“*What*?”

Though come to think of it, that bit might not have been the right part to jump in with.

“Oh shut up, you felt how hot it was in there.”

A few seconds of silence ticked by, then Ron asked, “Those wouldn’t happen to be these underpants out here, these blue ones with the little snitches on them?”

“Oh *shut up*, you know David thinks he’s funny.”

“He’ll be right, once he finds out that Draco Malfoy got to see you in them. You are going to tell him, right? Because if you won’t, I will. David absolutely needs to hear this. He’ll laugh himself sick.”

As hard as David might laugh, it couldn’t possibly be any louder than the laughter of the entire Weasley family's had been as Harry had opened up the gift containing those stupid underpants last Christmas. “I’ll tell him the next time I see him, whenever that is. Last I heard he was stuck in Greece at least through May, but that was back in January. He hasn’t written in a while.” Harry stuck his head back under the water to rinse it, then set about soaping himself up as quickly as he could.

“Ah, the unpredictable life of a Freelance Curse-Breaker,” Ron sighed. “Haven’t you talked him into joining up with Gringotts yet? He’d be back in London more often if he worked for them, and then the two of you could give a proper relationship a go.”

Harry shrugged even though Ron couldn’t see him behind the curtain. “He likes to travel.” That really wasn’t an answer one way or the other, but Ron didn’t press. Harry rinsed himself and twisted the shower knobs to off. “Towel?”

Ron tossed him one over the curtain rod and Harry wrapped it around his waist before he yanked the curtain back and stepped out. Ron trailed after him as he went back into the

bedroom and pulled open the top drawer on his dresser and found it empty. Damn, still needed to do laundry. He rooted around in the pile of clothing half-burying his laundry basket and came up with a somewhat wrinkled pair of underpants, and Ron politely averted his eyes as Harry pulled them on.

"So dare I ask what you and Malfoy did there, sitting around in your underpants?"

Harry located a pair of jeans and dragged those on too. "We talked." He pulled on a clean t-shirt and a black hoodie he'd only worn a couple of times since its last wash. "It was really weird, Ron. We talked about everything."

Ron looked at Harry suspiciously. "Define *everything*."

"I mean *everything*, everything. I saw his Mark when he took off his shirt, and…" He couldn't bring himself to tell Ron about the scarring. Malfoy's secrets weren't his to share. "And he was uncomfortable about it, so I just sort of blurted out that my aunt and uncle hated me. I don't even know why I said it, but then he said how he got in trouble for reading Muggle poetry in school, and so I said I was afraid of the dark and he didn't laugh at me for it, and he said… Well. It just went on. For, um, almost an hour."

Ron was gaping at him openly. "Let me get this straight, you basically told Draco Malfoy all of your secrets?"

"Nearly." Harry shrugged. "I didn't tell him I'm gay."

Ron threw up his hands. "I don't even know what to say to you. I don't even understand how you could tell *Malfoy* of all people—"

"He told me just as much back," Harry said defensively.

"How do you know he really has?" Ron demanded. "Maybe he was just making up shit so you'd keep spilling your secrets. That's the Slytherin thing to do."

"It's been a long time since school," Harry sighed. He went back into the bathroom and picked up the jeans he'd worn earlier and started to transfer the contents of their pockets to the ones he wore now. "And he wasn't lying. I know," he cut off Ron's protest, "because he's a rotten liar." Harry couldn't help but grin at the bald disbelief on Ron's face. He tossed his jeans in the general direction of the hamper and led the way out of his bedroom. "He's great at misdirection and hiding things. You know, lies of omission, that sort of thing. But he can't lie point-blank."

"And you know this how?" Ron asked doubtfully.

"Because I've been working with him for two weeks now?"

Ron frowned "He lies that much at work? Shouldn't you tell someone?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's not to other Aurors. It's to the public. Mostly, like, 'I haven't seen the article about me in this morning's paper,' or 'rescuing your daughter's cat from a tree

isn’t a waste of our resources at all,’ or ‘Harry Potter is England’s foremost expert in window repair.’ That sort of thing.”

Ron blinked. “Wait, window repair?”

“*My point* is that I’ve seen him lie, and he’s awful at it. His voice goes all fake. Not obvious fake, but just a little too calm and even. And his stare flickers off to the side, just for a second. I mean, they probably couldn’t tell they were being lied to, but you can spot it if you know him well enough.”

“And you know him well enough.” Ron sounded skeptical.

Harry shrugged. “Guess I do.” He sighed. “Look, I know this is probably a lot to ask, but could you maybe be sort of nice to him tonight?”

Ron gawped at him. “Be nice? To *Malfoy*?” he demanded as if those words didn’t belong in the same dictionary, never mind the same sentence.

“Well, yeah.” Harry rubbed distractedly at the back of his neck. “It’d, erm, make my investigation easier?”

The way Ron stared at him told Harry that he wasn’t sold on that for an instant, but he nodded and said, “Fine,” in the same resigned sort of voice he gave Hermione when she asked him to please empty the rubbish bin.

That was pretty much the best he could hope for, so Harry nodded. “He’ll try. Just try too. That’s all I ask.”

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Back at home, Draco really wasn't sure what he'd been thinking. Agreeing to join Potter for his pub night? The heat must have addled his brains. He didn't even know why he'd bothered to wait for Potter at St Mungo's in the first place, only that the fragile equanimity they'd found in that small room had vanished the moment Weasley's footsteps had sounded overhead, and there was a part of Draco that desperately wanted it back.

He sighed and dropped his robes into the laundry basket, removed his pocket watch and set it on the bureau, and went into the bathroom. After reaching into the shower to twist both knobs to full, he stripped out of his waistcoat, shirt, and trousers. In his underthings, he paused and turned to the full-length mirror opposite the sink and tried to see himself as Potter had seen him. The ugly Marked and scarred arm, of course. That always drew his eyes first, as it had Potter's. He pulled his gaze from it with some effort and met his own stare in the mirror, grey eyes made darker than usual by the dark smudges beneath them. Fine blond hair more mussed than he'd let it appear in public in absolutely ages, not since he’d last dismounted his broom after a Quidditch game. Long legs, still a touch too thin for a grown man. He fingered

the hem of his undershirt, then frowned and twisted to get a better look at the dark shape down his left side, showing faintly through the damp cotton. Well, that was a little more visible than he'd thought it. Surprising that Potter hadn't asked about it, nosy sod that he was. He'd asked about everything else.

Draco yanked the shirt over his head and tossed it aside before he brushed his fingers down his ribs, and the dragon inked on his side unfurled itself and shook its wings. He'd nearly removed his undershirt toward the end there in that room, and not just because the heat had become nearly unbearable. He'd wanted to show the dragon tattoo to Potter, the same way he'd confessed his (admittedly revolting) love of the envelope glue flavored Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans. Because this was just another secret when it came down to it, one he'd never shared with anyone before but one he'd suddenly found himself eager to reveal in a way he hadn't felt since he'd first gotten the dragon spelled onto his side back in the summer before sixth year. He'd wanted Potter to be the first to see it because he thought that Potter, of all people, might understand why.

He sighed a little as he turned to face the mirror again and rubbed a fingertip over the small patch of unmarked skin just over the middle of his sternum, an almost-perfect diamond hemmed in by four of the scars that crisscrossed his chest. The dittany hadn't been enough to erase them completely, but still eased them from a livid pink to a stark white. At the time he hadn't much cared, preoccupied with everything else as he'd been. He remembered waking up in a hospital bed and being greatly annoyed that Potter hadn't managed to off him properly; it'd have made his life a lot less complicated, and wasn't that just fucked up?

When he'd finally bothered to inspect the scars some time later, he was just relieved that they'd missed his tattoo. He didn't know what the dark magic of the curse would have done had it interacted with the magic in the ink, but he didn't think it'd be good. Draco prodded at his ribs again and the dragon lashed its tail. Even now, years later, no matter how it shifted on his skin, it would never touch the scars.

He'd resisted revealing it because that was a whole conversation he didn't want to have. Potter would feel horribly guilty (as he should, a corner of Draco's mind insisted, since he'd never bothered to apologize for nearly murdering Draco) and then would come a whole awkward conversation of *I'm sorry*s and *I didn't know what that spell did*s, and Draco didn't want to hear any of it. He'd been half-convinced by that point that they were both going to die, and he didn't want to spend his last minutes rehashing the worst moments of his own past. He'd wanted to hear more about Potter's rotten childhood and deepest fears and his love life. He wanted to hear all of the things that Potter hadn't even told his closest friends, and wanted to give Potter all the things he'd never told anyone either, trading their secrets back and forth like schoolboys trading Chocolate Frog Cards.

So he'd kept his shirt on and a few secrets tucked close to his chest.

Shame, that. He really had wanted Potter to see his tattoo. Draco felt that it was one of the few things he'd managed to get right in sixth year. Certainly it was the one thing he could think of from that time that he didn't look back on with regret.

The mirror had begun to fog, so Draco stripped off his underpants and stepped into the shower. He washed his hair and scrubbed his skin until it turned pink. He turned off the water

and stepped out. A few drying charms later, he went back into the bedroom and dressed in a clean set of underthings. He pulled on a pair of light grey trousers and automatically reached for the lilac dress shirt he normally paired them with, then paused with his hand on the hanger. Slowly he returned to the bureau and dug through it until he found a navy cable knit jumper he hadn't worn in at least a year. He shook it out, cast a few charms to get rid of the fold creases, then pulled it on and returned to the bathroom to inspect himself in the mirror.

Not bad. Not bad at all. Casual but still genteel, though in a bookish sort of way. Might as well complete the scholarly look. He reached for his wand and realized he'd left it in the bedroom. He stared hard at the doorway, stretched out one hand and *concentrated* as he Summoned his glasses from the pocket of his waistcoat. How funny, he thought as he slipped the thin gold frames onto his face and inspected himself in the mirror, that he could have talked to Potter for as long as he did and still have so many secrets. Though this one he hadn't even been tempted to share, because how could he after all the times he'd mocked Potter for his glasses? And wasn't that a shame because Draco looked *damn* good in these. Not that Potter would notice or care, of course. He cocked his head to one side and studied his reflection. But wouldn't it be nice if he did?

"You're being ridiculous," he said to himself and removed the glasses. "Even if he did like men, he'd still never look twice at you."

After returning to the bedroom to drop the glasses onto the top of his bureau beside his watch and slide his feet into a pair of dark dragonhide boots, he fetched his wand from the bedside table where he'd left it and Apparated to Diagon Alley.

He hesitated outside the Red Oak. Warm light and laughter spilled from the windows and doors. He didn't belong here. Potter had likely invited him out of pity, because how could he not pity him after everything that Draco had told him that afternoon? The smartest, most practical thing to do would be to turn around right now and walk straight back home. He stared at the door.

"You're being ridiculous," he told himself. "You're already here. Just go in, have one drink, and leave."

Before he could change his mind, Draco yanked the door open and stepped inside. Was it his imagination or did the dull roar of conversation falter as he walked in? He certainly hadn't imagined the suspicious glances from that group standing there by the bar, or the dark look the bartender leveled at him. Oh, this was a bad idea. This was a bad idea and he should just go before…

"Malfoy!"

Oh wonderful, in case anyone had managed to miss his entrance, Potter just made sure they knew now. Draco wanted to turn tail and flee but it was like someone had cast a Sticking Charm on the soles of his boots. And so he did the only thing he could; he drew himself up, spine straight, lifted his chin an imperious fraction, and pasted a faint sneer on his face. Some of the dark looks intensified at that, but Potter bounded up to him unaffected. He'd showered, Draco could tell by the way his damp hair curled enticingly at his temples, and Draco steeled himself against the spicy-sharp smell of his soap. Sure enough, he caught a whiff as Potter

grabbed Draco by his elbow and dragged him over to the side where a large bell was bolted to the wall. Potter rang it, and as it clanged the whole bar fell silent.

Draco really wanted to flee now. He wanted to knock Potter's hand off his arm and shove him aside and run because he couldn't take this, he couldn't stand the weight of all those accusing eyes. He felt like he had at his trial, exposed and on display. He'd hated it then, and he hated it now.

"Draco Malfoy is our man tonight!" Potter hollered, and Draco wanted to hex his stupid loud mouth shut. "He was right there with me, and we both nearly broiled to death not an hour earlier." He clapped Draco heavily on the shoulder. "If he hadn't been with me, I'd be dead now."

A smattering of baffled applause rose up, though most of the dark looks did not abate, and then the soft hubbub of a dozen conversations going at once slowly returned.

"Potter," said Draco, shrugging the hand from his shoulder. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He peered up innocently at Draco, eyes sparkling and warm. "Announcing you so they all know who to buy for. That's the tradition. And they really should know that you saved me."

Draco studied Potter closely and realized that he'd probably had a few drinks already. His face was a little flushed, eyes a little too bright and his smile a little too easy. And what on earth was he wearing? Some sort of slightly baggy long-sleeved black shirt with a great big stupid pocket sewn onto the belly and an odd little hood hanging down the back. Muggle, obviously, but *really*. Some things went too far.

"Come on!" Potter said with far too much enthusiasm. He fastened a hand around Draco's wrist and dragged him through the maze of tables and chairs and people to a small round table crammed into the back corner of the room with four chairs crowded around it.

Draco settled onto the far seat, which afforded him a view of the entire room as well as left his back to the wall. Potter dropped into the seat across from him where a half-empty pint glass sat. He picked it up, took a gulp, then put it down again and smiled at Draco.

"I'm glad you came tonight. I didn't think you would."

"I said I would, didn't I?" Draco shot back, though he felt inexplicably pleased that Potter wanted him here.

At that point, Weasley returned, bearing two pint glasses brimming with beer and two tumblers full of amber liquor. He set them down on the table and then dropped into the seat between Draco and Potter.

"There," he said. "The pints are from me, and there's my obligation done for the night. The whisky is from Richards over there." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the bar.

Potter picked up his tumbler and raised it in that general direction, and a heavyset blond man, whom Draco assumed to be Richards, waved back. Draco nodded politely, and got a cautious

nod in return.

“Come on, Malfoy,” Potter said, waving his drink in Draco’s direction.

Draco slowly picked up his own glass. "I don’t really drink.”

"You nearly died today, if ever there were a cause for drinking this is it." Potter paused, and his eyes went soft. "Is it because of...?” His gaze flickered to Draco’s left arm. “Because I can promise to take your wand away if it looks like you're thinking about casting an Incendio." Then his mouth dropped open as if he only just heard what he’d said. He looked horrified.

And Draco couldn't tell which of them was more surprised when all he did was laugh. Draco thought maybe he edged Potter out slightly, because he really thought he should be upset, but mostly he just liked when Potter got all flustered after he put his foot in it again. Evidently that more than made up for the fact that Potter apparently thought that Draco couldn’t be trusted to not set himself alight after a few drinks.

"No, that's quite all right."

And he knocked back his shot. The whisky burned a path down to his belly as Potter grinned at him and knocked back his own.

"I feel like I'm missing something," Weasley said, glancing between the pair of them.

"You’re always missing something,” Draco assured him and took a sip of his pint to clear the urge to cough from his throat.

Predictably, Weasley flushed as red as his hair. "Hey, I’m making an effort to be nice—"

"Believe it or not, Ron, this *is* Malfoy being nice," Harry broke in.

Weasley eyed him for a moment. "I guess you’re right. He is a Malfoy, after all."

This time Draco was undoubtedly offended, a hot flare of indignation threading through him. But as he opened his mouth to fire off a Weasley-themed insult, he caught sight of Potter watching him apprehensively. So he set his offense aside and forced a smile. "Exactly. Along with my devastatingly good looks and impressive assortment of mad relatives, the fact that I’m a Malfoy also means I'm utterly incapable of being nice."

The pleased smile that lit up Potter’s features assured him he made the right call. "That’s not true," Potter said. "You can be nice sometimes."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Know me that well, then, do you?"

"He should, for all the time he spent staring at you at Hogwarts,” Weasley muttered.

Potter went all flustered then, deliciously so, and Draco watched him stutter and blush with a bright flare of glee.

"Not all that much time. And only because I thought you were up to something." He paused and aimed a brooding glance at Draco. "To be fair, you usually were."

Draco didn't bother trying to hide his smile. He'd always wanted Potter's attention back in school; it pleased him to know that apparently he'd had it.

Weasley snorted. "I don't know why you're looking so entertained, Malfoy. You stared back just as much." He grinned right in Draco's surprised face. "Oh, you were always careful not to let him see, but you never looked at me to see whether I was watching."

Now Draco could feel himself going all pink and flustered and that was just not on. He pulled himself up straight. "I was only doing it because he was such an enormous prat." He glanced at Potter. "To be fair, you still are."

Potter laughed and raised his pint glass. "Cheers, Malfoy."

A shadow fell over the table, and a tall man with dark blond hair and a sour look on his face appeared with three tumblers of clear liquid in his hands.

"Evening Weasley, Potter," he nodded to them and pointedly didn't address Draco.

"Smith," Potter nodded back. "You've met Draco Malfoy, haven't you?" He looked at Draco and added, "Matthias Smith is Ron's partner."

"I don't believe I've had the honor," Smith said, and Draco would have believed him if the word 'honor' had meant something entirely different.

He set one of the tumblers down near Potter, then very deliberately spat into the one in his right hand before he offered it to Draco. The table went very still, Potter's eyes narrowing while Weasley's grew very wide. Slowly, Draco stood, then with the quick reflexes that had earned him the Seeker's position on the Slytherin team back in school, reached across the small table and plucked the third un-spat-in drink from Smith's left hand.

"Thank you, Smith," he said with a smirk as he dropped back into his chair. He toasted Smith with the tumbler before he knocked it back. Ugh, vodka. He hated vodka. But Draco forced a smile anyhow and dropped his empty glass into the one on the table before him that had held the whisky.

Potter and Weasley still hadn't moved, but Smith fixed him with a potent glare. And honestly, who did he think he was glaring at? Draco had been glaring at Potter that way at the tender age of twelve and he'd only improved from there. He smiled again, a wide easy smile that said 'I refuse to play your silly little game and doesn't that just piss you off' and had the immense satisfaction of watching Smith stomp away from them, spitty vodka still clutched in his hand.

"He's a pleasant fellow," Draco said to Weasley. "My condolences."

"Uh, thanks, Malfoy." Weasley didn't seem to know what to do with himself.

Draco took a long draught from his pint glass. “On the other hand,” he drawled. “I’m sure it just gives you and Potter *loads* to talk about, now that you’ve both got ghastly partners, am I right? I can just see it now… ‘Oh Potter, you won’t believe how Smith glared at me today!’ and then ‘Honestly, Weasley, Malfoy’s been practicing his withering glares of hatred on me since we were eleven, and he’s able to say “Potter is a halfwit” just by raising his eyebrows.’ and then Weasley will say back, ‘Yes, but Smith hasn’t got any *manners*. At least Malfoy is in possession of impeccable taste and good breeding whilst calling you a gormless lummox.’” Draco stopped talking, aware that perhaps the alcohol was getting to him already.

To his surprise, Weasley tipped his head back and laughed, a great deep boom of mirth that came up from his belly and made Draco think of Parsons for one frozen second. Then Weasley grinned at Draco and said, “You know, I think I’m starting to see why Harry hasn’t hexed you yet.”

“Aside from the paperwork, you mean,” Draco confided sagely. “Potter is terribly inadequate when it comes to paperwork. I'd imagine there’s quite a lot of it that needs to be filed for hexing your partner.” He cast a significant glance at Potter. “Oh, I suppose you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you? Tell me, were there separate forms you had to fill out for Stunned and Body-Bound, or were you able to do it all on one?”

Weasley laughed again, and this time Potter chuckled too. Draco hadn’t realized how tense Potter had been until his shoulders relaxed. He wanted them to get along, it hit Draco suddenly. It was important to Potter that his partner and his best friend get along. Draco laughed a little too, struck by how surreal it felt to be joking with Weasley. Although if he’d known that all he had to do was poke a little fun at himself along with making fun of Potter, well, he could have done that ages ago.

"So, how are your cases?" Weasley asked Potter in the silence that followed.

Potter pulled a face. "Shall I give you a complete list of all of the things that Mrs. Dodson had 'stolen' this week? That we then later found hidden all around her shop? Because other than nearly baking to death today, that's really all I've done."

"And the Steinmiller case?"

"Got pulled from it when…" Potter trailed off and tossed back the rest of his vodka.

…when you got partnered with me, Draco finished mentally. He felt a small stab of guilt at that, then dismissed the feeling with a flash of irritation. It certainly wasn't his fault they'd stuck Potter with him, nor was it his fault that they insisted on giving him shite cases.

"Wasn’t there another case you had?” Weasley asked.

Potter shook his head. “No, the only other one I’ve got is the, erm. Well.” He took a hasty sip from his pint.

"This would be the Top Secret one?" Draco asked, and was pleasantly rewarded by the way that Weasley's eyes bugged out.

He wheeled on Potter. "You told him about it?"

"No, of course I haven't!" Potter exclaimed, going all flustered again.

"He left the folder on his desk," Draco put in helpfully, hoping Potter's face might go a little pinker. Potter's face kindly obliged him.

"You left the folder on your desk?" Weasley's voice rose.

"I may have, but—"

"Top Secret and you left it on your desk. Harry, sometimes I wonder what the hell you're… Did he read it?"

"Of course I didn't read it. I'm a professional," Draco sniffed. "I even managed to avoid reading the label."

"You labeled it?" Weasley choked out. "With a name?"

Potter shifted in his seat. "Yes, well, look—"

"Wait," Draco said, adding up the aggrieved look on Weasley's face and the way his voice rose. "You know what the case is about?"

Now Weasley looked uncomfortable. "Well…"

Draco frowned at Potter. "Top Secret, and you're telling him about it but not me? I'm your partner."

"It's not that I don't want to tell you, it's that I can't. Look. It's dreadfully boring, and a complete waste of time. I only told Ron about it because I was complaining."

Draco frowned harder, raised his eyebrows and folded his arms over his chest.

Potter sighed. "Okay, fine."

"Harry…" Weasley warned.

"Hush, Ron. Look," Leaned over the table toward Draco and lowered his voice. "It's Death Eater stuff. Stupid Death Eater stuff that's going nowhere and isn't going to go anywhere because there's not one shred of evidence to support it. They didn't feel it necessary to call you in on it because they felt you might be too close to view the situation objectively. Satisfied?"

Draco wasn't satisfied, not in the least. "Why are you telling me this? Do the words 'Top Secret' mean nothing to you?" It did strike him as a bit silly that he'd gone from trying to wheedle the details of the case out of Potter to being offended that he'd let them slip. But honestly, did no one around here follow rules but him? "You shouldn't be telling me this! You shouldn't have told him this!"

"To be fair, he tells me all sorts of things he really shouldn't," Weasley muttered with the dejected resignation of the long-suffering, then perked up and grinned at Potter. "Hey, remember back in fifth year, you kept harping on about that one fantasy where you—"

"Ron," Potter cut him off a bit desperately. "Shut up."

"You didn't mention any fantasies to me while we were trapped and confessing all our deepest secrets like a gaggle of first-year girls. Though to be fair we'd only just gotten to the sex stuff when Weasley interrupted."

He'd been hoping for more of a reaction out of Weasley, but Potter must have already filled him in on their conversation because he only sighed and grumbled something into his pint glass. For a moment, Draco panicked. How much had Potter told him? Weasley hadn't been treating him any different this evening, just with the same wary courtesy he'd shown the few times they'd run into each other around the Ministry.

"Did you tell him about...?" Draco asked and tapped his left arm.

"Come off it, Malfoy," Weasley said, rolling his eyes. "It's not like everyone doesn't already know you're Marked."

Draco ignored him, watched instead as Potter gave the tiniest shake of his head. No. Potter hadn't told. He hadn't thought he would, frankly, because Draco had enough blackmail material on him to make everyone at the *Prophet* suffer simultaneous coronaries of glee, but still. It was nice to have it confirmed. Draco allowed a small smile and nodded back.

"I only tell secrets that are mine to tell," Potter said softly.

"Like Top Secret cases?" Weasley asked dryly.

"I for one would like to hear more about this fantasy," Draco said, steering the conversation back to something more likely to make Potter turn red.

Weasley glanced back and forth between Draco and Potter, clearly weighing his misgivings of Draco against his desire to embarrass the hell out of his friend. "Well—"

Potter stabbed a finger at him. "Ron. I mean it. Tell and I swear I'll drown you in your pint."

"I don't think his big head would fit in the pint glass," Draco pointed out.

"I'd try." Potter sounded as if he would, too.

"I'd really rather you didn't," Draco sighed. "I'd be forced to arrest you for drunk and disorderly, disturbing the peace, and misintention of a pint glass."

"Misintention of a pint glass?" Weasley echoed. "That's not a real charge."

"It most certainly is. One of my favorites, might I add. Right up there with assault with a deadly umbrella. That one was added specifically for Hagrid, I'm afraid. Oh, and gross

negligence of a petticoat. I think that one might be my very favorite, now that I think about it."

"Now I know you're having me on. That can't possibly be real," Weasley said.

"It most certainly is," Draco insisted, then cleared his throat and launched into lecture mode. "Back in 1827, November I believe it was, a young witch by the name of Druella Dornsberg had ventured into Muggle London when she caught the attention of—"

"How do you even know all this?" Potter interrupted. He sounded highly entertained.

"I read, Potter, it's not that foreign a concept. If I'm going to be assigned MLEP cases, I ought to be familiar with their codes and charges, oughtn't I? And I must admit, it's become something of a hobby of mine to book perpetrators with the most outdated or obscure charges I can find. Now. As I was saying, in November of 1827, young Druella—"

"Bloody hell, mate," Weasley said to Potter. He sounded a bit shell-shocked. "It's like you're working with Hermione. A snarky blond Hermione."

"That's absolutely not true. She's…" He broke off to find them both watching him intently and with varying degrees of trepidation, probably just waiting for the word 'Mudblood' to fall out of his mouth. He cleared his throat. "I've got much better hair than she does."

"You did before you cut it all off," Potter said, then promptly looked distressed by what he'd just said. He lifted his pint glass to his lips so fast that for a second it looked like he wanted to cram the entire thing into his mouth, and if *that* wasn't misintention of a pint glass…

An awkward silence spread across the table. Potter stared into his pint glass, Weasley did a bit of sighing, and Draco couldn't bloody take it anymore. He had to say something, but he didn't know what to talk about. He barely knew Weasley, and he'd only just begun to get to know Potter. Quidditch, they all played Quidditch, didn't they? Draco seemed to recall Weasley wearing a wholly inappropriate amount of orange back in school, which either meant that he was determined to make himself look as frightfully ginger as possible, or—

"How are the Cannons doing this season?" Draco asked.

"Not bad," Weasley said, brightening. "I think they've got a real shot this year."

Potter rolled his eyes. "They absolutely do not, Ron. Anyone with half a brain knows that Puddlemere United's the team to beat this year. They just took on Trowbridge as their new Seeker."

"Bah!" said Weasley, gesturing with his pint glass so enthusiastically he nearly dumped it on Potter's lap. "Trowbridge couldn't find his prick to take a piss."

"And yet you think the Cannons have a shot at winning with Gudgeon as their Seeker. I honestly haven't got a clue why that man is still on the team," Potter said.

"Probably because no one else could be bribed onto the team to take his place," Draco answered.

Weasley's face twisted up in a peculiar but highly amusing mixture of stubborn indignation and defeated acceptance. "He's not—"

"Ron," Harry interrupted. "The man once mistook a bumblebee for the snitch. *A bumblebee*."

"That was years ago. Years!" Weasley seemed to be growing agitated.

"So who are you for?" Draco asked Potter, hoping to steer the conversation away from the Cannons and Weasley away from an apoplexy.

"Holyhead Harpies. Ginny would kill me if I weren't. Ron gets away with it because he's her brother, and he's been a Cannons fan for ages. Also, we suspect he was dropped on his head as a child."

"That would explain why he expects the Cannons to have any chance of winning," Draco couldn't resist adding.

"And I suppose your team's so much better?" Weasley asked scornfully.

"Not really, no," Draco said with a shrug. "They're on a five-game losing streak, but I'm only for the Kestrals because their kit is green."

Weasely rolled his eyes. "You're such a Slytherin."

Draco grinned "I can't help it if I look fantastic in emerald."

"If that's the only reason, then you really should support the Tutshill Tornados," Potter said.

Draco frowned at him. "Their kit's not green, Potter. It's blue."

"I know," Potter said and looked as if he wanted to hide beneath the table.

Which made no sense at all to Draco, because Potter was a halfwit all the time. Shouldn't he be used to it by now?

"Green and blue are not the same color," he continued slowly.

Potter sighed. "I know."

"Then why—"

"Because you…" Potter sighed again and peered down into his pint glass. "I really think I need to slow down."

Draco frowned at him. "You really are an odd one, aren't you?"

The corner of Potter's mouth ticked up in a faint smile. "I really am."

Some time and a large-ish number of drinks later, Draco had moved away from Potter's table and found himself a relatively quiet seat at the far end of the bar. He sat alone, nursing a pint and enjoying the pleasant buzzing in his head and the slow numbness spreading through his

limbs while the comfortably cheerful sound of conversation and laughter washed over him. He imagined that he could pick out Potter's laugh above all the rest.

He was busy mulling over exactly *why* it should make him feel as warm and content as he did to recognize Potter's laugh when Potter himself appeared. Draco began to turn on his stool to face him just as Potter tried to jam himself between Draco's stool and the one beside him, occupied by a giggly witch who'd been slugging back martinis at an alarming rate. And the end result was Draco perched awkwardly on the edge of his stool with his legs spread wide and Potter standing between them

"Hey, you disappeared on me," Harry said with a grin, utterly clueless of the position he was in.

"Obviously not," Draco managed, and he was glad that he was still capable of making any response at all because he was very drunk at this point and Potter was standing between his knees. If he scooted forward just a bit more on his stool he could… oh, stop thinking about that. Stop thinking about that right now.

"Obviously," Potter said and leaned an elbow on the bar, the outside of his thigh brushing against the inside of Draco's knee.

And what could Draco do? He couldn't move it away from Potter because that would mean spreading his legs wider still and he already felt immodest enough, and then the giggling witch gestured too widely and bumped Potter, and Potter shuffled forward a little half-step and now his leg was pressed to the inside of Draco's thigh and he could feel the warmth of it even through his trousers and the faded jeans Potter wore and oh Merlin why was this happening to him?

"I have to go," he said suddenly. He grabbed for his pint glass, tossed back the remaining two inches and slammed it back onto the bar.

"It is getting pretty late. Let's go say goodbye to Ron and I'll walk out with you."

That wasn't what Draco wanted at all; he wanted Potter to bloody well leave him alone so he could *breathe* and *think* again, but then Potter stepped back to give Draco room to slide off his stool and Draco found that a bit of distance did wonders for his respiration and cognitive abilities, even though standing seemed to have a near-disastrous effect on his balance. He wobbled and Potter reached out to steady him, and Draco made a desperate grab for his stool and by some miracle didn't fall over. He waved away Potter's hovering hands.

After a quick stop by Weasley's table to say goodnight, they headed out the door and down the front steps.

"Which way are you?" Potter asked as they stood on the sidewalk.

"That way," Draco said, gesturing up the street.

"Oh, me too," Harry said. "I'll walk you."

They set off. The temperature had dropped while they'd been inside the pub, and a brisk wind had picked up. Potter shoved both hands into that big pocket on the front of his shirt, which suddenly seemed a lot less stupid than it had looked earlier. Draco pulled the cuffs of his jumper as far down over his hands as they'd go.

They walked in silence, through alternating pools of streetlight and shadow, and Draco couldn't help but notice that Potter looked better than he had all week, face flushed and happy from an evening of companionship and drinking. His tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip and Draco wanted to trace its path with his own. He wanted to push Potter up against the nearest surface and snog him senseless. His hand had actually twitched closer to Potter's sleeve, preparing to grasp and pull before he caught himself. He folded his arms over his chest, pinning his traitorous hands in his armpits where they could do no grabbing. He was drunk. That was all this was. Harry Potter was very fit and Draco was pissed out of his mind.

"I think I'm rather pissed," he said aloud.

Potter glanced over at him with one of those broad open smiles that made Draco's insides warm. "That's rather the point of drinking, isn't it?"

"Moreso than I meant to be," Draco said to clarify. "It's been a long time since I've had more than a glass of wine with dinner."

Potter looked him up and down, and Draco's skin prickled. "You don't look too pissed. You're barely even wobbly."

Yes, true, but he still had this damn near irresistible urge to push Potter up against the lamppost they were just passing, to press the length of his body flush against him, to swipe his tongue over the soft curve of Potter's bottom lip until it opened up for him and—

Draco coughed, once. "I'm more off-balance than I look."

At the next intersection Potter started to veer off to the right, while Draco tried to go left. After a few steps they realized they'd begun to part ways and stopped.

"I'm just up there," Potter said, pointing to the right.

"I'm that way a bit," Draco pointed the other direction.

"Right," Potter said. "Well." He paused. "You know, I'm really glad today happened."

Draco blinked at him. "You're glad we both nearly died?"

Potter scrunched up his nose. "Well, not that part. I could've lived without that part."

A laugh burst out from Draco before he could stop it. "Could have lived without dying," he said and laughed again.

"Hush, you," Potter said mildly, amused. "What I meant was I'm glad we went through that, and, um, what happened. You know, talking to you, and… Telling you all that, and you

telling me."

Draco frowned as he tried to parse that. It was one of the least cohesive sentences he'd ever heard Potter attempt to string together, and there was no small amount of competition for that particular honor, and Draco had really had quite a lot to drink. "You're really awful at talking sometimes, aren't you?"

Even though he didn't think he'd said anything funny, Potter laughed. "Yes, sometimes I really am." He smiled at Draco, and Draco's insides went all warm and wobbly in a way that he couldn't quite pretend was from alcohol. "Look, what I meant to say is, I feel like I got to know you today. I mean, I've known you for ages but this is really the first time you've really let me know you. And I'm glad of that."

Oh. Well. "I'm glad too," Draco said.

"And, well, I think I'd like to be friends now. If you're still offering?" Harry put his hand out.

Draco flashed back to when he'd put his own hand out all those years ago and been rejected. And now Potter was offering? Part of Draco wanted to lash out, to look down his nose and tell Potter that he was thirteen years too late, but the rest of him was stunned to realize that he still wanted this as much now as he'd wanted it back then.

Potter wiggled his fingers a little, catching Draco's attention. "Yes? No? It's cold and I'd really like to put my hand back in my pocket now."

"Yes," Draco managed. "Of course." He clasped Potter's hand in his own, firm and so much warmer than Draco's own. He didn't want to let go, but Potter tugged his own hand free and tucked it back inside his pocket shirt.

"You know," Potter said. "You called me Harry before."

He had?

"I did?"

"Yes. Just after I so brilliantly got us trapped. You were saying how you should have just let me go in and then opened it up again, and you said, 'I'm sorry, Harry.' I think it's the first time you've ever called me Harry without adding 'bloody Potter' onto the end of it." He paused, his eyes searching Draco's face in a way that made Draco feel more naked and exposed than he'd felt in that small hot room. "I think I'd like it if you did it more often. Now that we're friends and all."

"You've never called me Draco before," he pointed out, and inwardly winced. Merlin, why did he have this constant urge to be so bloody contrary?

But Potter only smiled at him again. "So I haven't."

He nodded slowly. "All right, then."

"All right," Potter said.

Draco became aware at that moment of just how close they were standing. How if he took just one small step closer and tilted his head down a bit he'd be able to brush his lips across Potter's. Potter was still watching him carefully, his eyes so big and green in the light of the streetlamp above them. Draco swayed just a little closer, one hand reaching slowly for Potter's elbow, and his heart pounded so hard he could feel it thudding at his throat. Was he actually going to do this? Was he actually going to kiss Harry bloody Potter? This was happening, this was really happening.

"Goodnight, Draco," Potter said softly, and Draco couldn't look away from his mouth.

"Goodnight, Harry," he echoed. His fingertips brushed the soft fabric of Potter's pocket shirt.

And then Potter took a quick step back, smiling. "I'll see you Monday."

The moment broke like a thin sheet of ice and the cold reality of what the fuck he'd just *almost done* washed over him. This, this right here was why he didn't drink. Because he did incredibly and inexcusably stupid things. Like set himself on fire. Or almost kiss Harry bloody Potter.

"Right. Monday." Draco nodded and turned away, hurrying back up the street.

With the distance between himself and Potter growing with every step he took, the terrified dread of his almost-actions faded, replaced by the glowing warmth of earlier. Things between them were still a little awkward, but Potter genuinely seemed to like him. He'd been invited out on a pub night, and it hadn't gone horribly, and now Potter—now *Harry*—wanted to be friends, and liked Draco enough to think that them becoming friends was even possible in the first place. Draco just knew he'd been right on that train to offer his hand, however he may have doubted it at times in the years that followed. He knew they'd get along wonderfully, given half a chance.

He glanced back over his shoulder just as Harry turned to look back at him as well. Draco nearly turned away again, but Harry waved a hand at him before he turned back and continued walking. Draco imagined that Harry was smiling, and an answering smile spread across his own face. He turned back to continue home himself, and that's when it hit him.

The faint awkwardness. The warmth. The flutters in his belly. The thrill of Harry's smile and his laugh and this damned urge to kiss him.

This didn't feel like parting ways with a coworker after a pub night. This didn't feel like saying goodnight to a friend after an evening out.

This felt like a bloody date.

Draco spun around again and stared after Harry's retreating form. This wasn't just physical attraction anymore; it was like a dam had broken and the rush of affection for Potter suddenly ran a whole hell of a lot deeper.

This felt like a fucking *date*.

The cold feeling of dread swept over him again and this time Draco let himself drown in it.

He was absolutely fucked.

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Harry returned to the pub to find it had emptied out some since he'd left. He felt better than he had when he'd left, head still muddled and knees a bit wobbly, but the walk back in the brisk spring air had cleared much of the alcohol-induced haze from his brain. He saw that Ron had migrated from their table to the bar. He'd taken Draco's seat at the end, and the tipsy witch with the annoying laugh had disappeared. Harry slid onto the stool beside his friend.

"Harry? I thought you left," he said.

"I did. I came back." He sighed. "Ron, I've got a problem."

"Hm?"

"I…" Harry sucked in a deep breath. Ron wasn't going to like this at all. "Ron, I think I like Malfoy."

But to Harry's surprise, Ron only sighed and said, "I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but I'm starting to like him too. He's still an arse, mind you, but he's mostly okay."

"No," Harry said, and swallowed hard. "No, mate. I like him. Like, I *like* him like him."

For several long moments, Ron just stared at him. Then he slowly pushed his half-empty pint glass to Harry. "Here," he said. "You finish that for me. I'm going to need something stronger if we're going to have this conversation."

A few minutes later, Ron had procured a large tumbler of whiskey from the bartender. He drained a quarter of it in one long gulp and sighed. He set the glass carefully on the bar in front of him and turned on his stool to face Harry.

"Let me play armchair Mind Healer for a moment here," Ron said. "I don't think you really like him. I think you've been through a traumatic event with him, you shared an intense conversation, and then he came out with us tonight and didn't act like a complete bastard. It's only natural you'd feel closer to him after this. Right?" He paused and Harry really couldn't tell which of them Ron was trying to convince. "Besides, I get why you'd be sort of attracted to him. He's your type. And in a few days you'll remember that he's also Malfoy and this will pass." Ron nodded once to himself and picked up his glass.

"I don't have a type," Harry protested.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Oh please, Harry. Don't even. You like your men thin, blond, and leggy, and if he's got a smart mouth on him, so much the better."

“I do not!”

“Harry. Joseph? William?” He paused. “*David*?” He sipped his whiskey. “All of your boyfriends were sort of the same.”

Harry took a small swallow of Ron’s abandoned pint as he considered that. He’d only dated Joseph for a few weeks, barely long enough to be considered a boyfriend at all. And William’s hair was more of a very light brown than a true blond. He sighed.

“Well, I guess he does remind me a bit of David.”

“You know,” Ron said. “I’ve always suspected that the whole thing with David came about because of that whole obsession with Malfoy in school. They really are rather similar.”

“For the last time, Ron. I was not obsessed with Malfoy in school. I thought he was up to something.”

Ron snorted. “Right, I’m sure all of that was just because you found him pernicious.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Oh, I see you’ve been talking to Hermione again.”

“Please, as if she’s not where you’ve learned every polysyllabic word you know too,” Ron said with a laugh.

“Ooh, polysyllabic,” Harry teased. “Watch it, you’re starting to sound positively pedantic.”

Ron toasted him with the remains of his whiskey before he knocked it back. “Pedantic. Nice one.”

Harry grinned at him. “I only remember that one because it reminds me a bit of *penis*.”

Ron laughed. “I’m going to tell Hermione you said that.” He picked up his empty glass, then sighed and put it back down. “You know that nothing can happen between you two.”

“I know,” Harry said with a sigh that came out far more maudlin than he intended. “First off, he’s not gay. Ouch!” he yelped as Ron thwapped him upside the head.

“No, Harry, *first off* he’s under investigation for murder, an investigation on which, might I add, you are primary. Second, you’re partners. Taking up with him would break at least a dozen different regulations. And third, okay, third I’ll give you, he’s not gay. And fourth, he’s the only son and sole heir of a very traditional pureblood family. Even if he *was* gay, which he’s not, he’ll be expected to marry off and beget little Malfoy heirs.” Ron swiped his pint glass back from Harry and gulped down the rest of it. “And fifth, and most important in my opinion, he’s Draco sodding Malfoy.”

“Right,” Harry said softly. “You’re absolutely right.”

Because he *was* Draco sodding Malfoy. And Harry was beginning to suspect that was exactly the problem.

Chapter 6

The next morning, Draco awoke to find himself stretched diagonally across his bed, one foot dangling off the edge and the bed sheets bunched uncomfortably beneath him. He'd managed to remove his jumper and trousers before passing out but, for some mysterious reason, he'd only taken off one of his socks. The brilliant sunlight screaming through the window – had his bedroom always been this bloody bright? – made him squeeze his eyes shut against it and set off a vicious pounding in his head. His mouth tasted thick and dry, and his stomach rolled alarmingly as he forced himself to sit up. The clock on his bedside table informed him it was just past noon.

Draco groaned and pressed a hand to his eyes. Maybe if he stayed very still, his stomach would settle. He took slow, shallow breaths, and gradually the urge to sick up subsided from 'danger, danger!' to 'it might be a good idea to move closer to the toilet, just in case.' Moving slowly and gingerly, he managed to drag himself mostly vertical and got dressed in yesterday's trousers and a plain black jumper, then shambled to the toilet to relieve the pressure in his bladder. That taken care of, he began to reach for his toothbrush out of habit, but the mere idea of sticking something into his mouth at present set off a fresh round of roiling in his belly. Draco cleaned his face and teeth with a few mild spells, did his best to pat his hair down into something approaching presentable, and left the bathroom in search of shoes.

The problem with drinking heavily after not having done so for years—being utterly blindsided by the ensuing hangover notwithstanding—was that he'd let his stockpile of Hangover Potion expire. It'd be easy enough to brew up a fresh batch, but the idea of going downstairs to his potions lab and chopping ingredients and stirring and waiting and stirring and concentrating and waiting some more was enough to ratchet up the pounding in Draco's skull to a new level. Likewise, the idea of braving a bustling Diagon Alley at lunchtime on a Saturday, dealing with the barbed looks and accidental-on-purpose jostling of passersby, the shopkeeper's sneering, the new round of articles the *Prophet* would run on his presumed alcoholism if anyone caught him making his purchase…

Draco pressed a hand to his stomach as it rolled unpleasantly.

No, he knew a better place to go.

He paused on the landing to glance out the window. He couldn't see a cloud in the sky and the sun shone bright and warm. Normally he walked the thirty minutes to the Ministry, especially on beautiful days like this, but he couldn't handle that right now. He continued down to the ground floor of his end terrace where he went to his Floo, tossed in a handful of powder as he announced "The Ministry of Magic!" and stepped into the whooshing green flames.

He stumbled out into the Atrium and took a few minutes to prop himself up on the wall just beside the Floo, one hand clasped to his stomach as it lurched and made a valiant effort to crawl up his throat. 'I will not sick up in the Atrium, I will not sick up in the Atrium,' he

mentally chanted to himself. After what felt like entirely too long, the nausea quieted enough that he felt he could continue.

Being entirely unwilling to trust himself to the lifts in his delicate state, Draco made his slow and careful way via the staircases down to the MLEP wing where he knew there was a small triage station set up for minor ailments and injuries. The pair of young Mediwitches on duty paused in their gossiping as he appeared in their doorway. One of them, a doll-like blond with big curls and blue eyes, made a faint squeak of surprise. The other, a brunette he thought he vaguely recalled passing in the halls at Hogwarts, looked him up and down.

"You look like shit," she said and looked him up and down again before adding, "Warmed over."

Draco couldn't bring himself to argue with her. She was probably right, in any case. "I can assure you I feel like it. I don't suppose you'd have any Hangover Potion back there that you could let me have?"

The brunette raised an eyebrow. "Coming in to work hungover?"

Draco thought he should feel angry or offended at her judgmental tone, but he was too distracted by trying to not throw up on her counter. He didn't feel that would endear him to her, although it might convince her to hand over the potion faster.

"It's my day off. The way I see it, coming in when I don't have to be here balances out coming in hungover."

That got a smile out of her. She pushed her wheeled office chair over to the shelves behind her and picked up a small vial before wheeling back to the counter and setting it down before him.

Draco's fingers closed around it and he pried the cork from the vial, tipped it back and gulped down the contents. His stomach heaved—really, who thought it was in any way acceptable to have a potion intended to treat nausea taste this revolting?—and he clamped a hand over his mouth. He squeezed his eyes shut and vowed that his next potions project would be improving the taste, and slowly the roiling in his stomach abated as his headache faded and the lights became bearable. His mouth still felt dry, but that was easily remedied with a nice soothing cup of tea. Draco cleared his throat and pressed the cork back into the vial before he set it down on the counter.

"Thank you," he said, the vanishing nausea leaving plenty of room for embarrassment in its wake.

"Don't mention it," the brunette said and winked at him. "Since you're here on your day off, I suppose I don't need to make you sign for it."

"I…" Draco paused and cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Thank you."

He left them to their gossip and went down to the break room where he set a kettle of water to boiling with a swish of his wand. While he waited for his tea to steep, he couldn't help

thinking of last night. He'd avoided thinking about it in any sort of depth so far, but now that his head no longer felt in danger of splitting in two, he couldn't seem to think of anything else. Looking back, the faint hope he'd clung to just before he'd collapsed into bed and passed out for the night, that it was *just the alcohol*, didn't hold up to the harsh light of day. It wasn't just the alcohol that made him feel like this. Now, shockingly sober, he still felt that little flutter in his belly when he thought of Potter's laugh, and the slow spread of warmth behind his ribs at the memory of how Potter had smiled at him. And the almost-kiss?

"Get ahold of yourself," he muttered as he spelled the tea leaves from his cup and deposited them in the rubbish bin.

Back up in his office, he threw himself into his paperwork. Alone and with no chance of being interrupted, he took his spare pair of glasses from the top drawer of his desk and slid them onto his face and breathed a sigh of relief as the words of the forms came sharply into focus. During the week with Potter around, he relied on a spell to do the same thing, but the bloody thing made his eyes itch something awful if he kept it on too long.

He'd only just finished his tea by the time he got the paperwork and incident reports for yesterday's events sorted. He penned Shacklebolt's name on the folder and nearly dropped it into his Outbox, but stopped. Maybe some things were best delivered in person, he thought. He set it aside and stared up at his filing. He could continue implementing his new color-coded tab system, but it wouldn't be enough to keep his mind totally occupied, and besides, he would need a task for during the week to distract him from the fact that Potter was sitting just across the small room from him, something that had become increasingly difficult to ignore.

Draco stood and stretched, smiling faintly as the tension in his spine eased with a loud click, then removed his glasses and dropped them into the top drawer of his desk. Might as well finish up the safe house, then.

A few minutes later he found himself standing in front of the house again. He gave his wrist a quick twist so that his wand dropped neatly from his sleeve into his hand and brandished it with a little flourish before he strode up the front walk to the porch and stepped into the house.

Draco made short work of the entryway. The spells on the door and windows there relied on inattention and ignorance to catch their victims. Once discovered, they never put up much resistance to being taken down. The front parlor and dining room took a little more time, but every spell he disabled in there was one he'd encountered at least a dozen times before, and they came down quickly and easily.

In the kitchen, he discovered that whichever Death Eater had trapped this place (Draco still thought it had been one of the Carrows) had tied the gas lines of the hulking iron oven to the scuffed tiles just before the back door in a clever series of little cascading reactions that would ensure the transformation of the kitchen into a firestorm in about four seconds flat if. Draco had never encountered anything like this before, so he took the time to fetch his notepad and jot down some details before he began to work on disabling it. By the time he finished, he was grinning and the tiles were once again safe to walk over and the door safe to open. He hadn't come across anything this tricky in a long time, and he relished the puzzle it

had given him. He took a few minutes to add to his notes, then tucked his notepad away before turning to see to the rest of the ground floor.

As he made his way down the hall, disabling the regularly spaced traps on the floorboards with a competency he could have managed in his sleep, Draco's mind began to wander.

As he disarmed a section of floor meant to provide a quick and painful shortcut to the basement, Draco thought of sitting in the bar at the end of the night before and hearing the high bright sound of Potter's laugh rising about the rest of the raucous pub noise, and how he'd sat there and puzzled over why it made him feel all tingly inside to recognize it. Draco sighed and blamed that on the drinking because it was obvious now. He'd liked it because he liked Potter.

As he poked his head into a bathroom and disabled the hex that would cause the toilet lid to grow fangs and snap shut on anyone foolish enough to try to use it—and that positively reeked of Alecto's sense of humor—Draco thought of how Potter had looked as they'd walked toward home, his dark hair falling over his forehead as he looked up at Draco, how the lamplight had made his eyes gleam behind his glasses, and the way his mouth curved into an affable grin that just begged to be kissed.

Draco came to a small parlor at the rear of the house and took a moment to observe the room: wide windows overlooking the overgrown back garden, small cluster of furniture shoved into the back corner and draped with sheets, rose-patterned throw rug covering most of the floor, and an enormous gaudy chandelier dangling almost low enough to bump his head on. He frowned as he cast a series of diagnostic charms from the doorway, and finally let himself think of the almost-kiss.

At the time he'd thought Potter wanted it as much as he did. His easy smile, the warm look in his eyes, the gentle timbre of his voice as he murmured, "Goodnight, Draco," and tilted his head back just a fraction. All of it said 'I want this too,' and 'please kiss me.' After Potter had stepped back, Draco had instantly assumed that he'd been imagining things, that he'd been drunk enough to misinterpret signals and was seeing what he wanted to see. But thinking back on it, he felt that his first impression had been correct. He cast his mind back further, sifting through the rest of the night and coming up with a dozen other little signs. The way Potter had taken him unnecessarily by the arm to lead him to their corner table. The warm press of his leg to Draco's knee. The way his fingers brushed Draco's and lingered for a moment as he handed over a fresh pint.

And the Quidditch conversation. Draco broke off mid-charm. Merlin, how had he missed that? He'd said he was for the Kestrals because he looked good in green, and Potter had said that he ought to be for the Tornados in that case. At the time he'd assumed Potter was being an idiot and mixing up the team's colors, but the way that he'd immediately looked as if he'd be glad for the floor to open beneath him and swallow him whole… What if he hadn't been confused about team colors? What if, in his roundabout Potter-ish way, he'd really been trying to say, 'I think you look better in blue.'

Draco's head swam as he disabled the parlor's cursed doorjamb on blind instinct alone.

Maybe this foolish crush on Potter wasn't as unrequited as he'd assumed. If Potter was attracted to him… but in the oven trap yesterday, Potter hadn't said anything about that. But then again, neither had Draco. A bit desperately, Draco cast his mind back over the past two weeks, picking at every sentence, every expression, every small accidental touch.

Draco pursed his lips and disarmed a section of wall set to collapse on anyone who walked too close before he crossed the room, his footfalls quiet on the carpet, to get a better look at how the chandelier sparked red beneath his diagnostic charms.

Attention torn between Potter and the chandelier, he nearly missed the faint warning tingle of magic flaring up from beneath his feet. Draco barely got a Shield Charm up in time as the roses on the carpet came to life, shooting up and lashing out at him with vines covered in razor-sharp thorns. It took effort to hold the charm in a sphere around himself, and the thorned vines grew larger and more vicious with every second that passed, lashing at his shield with enough force to make the air inside his protective sphere vibrate. Draco's ears rang painfully.

He was trapped, couldn't disarm the carpet without dropping the charm, couldn't drop the charm without being sliced to ribbons. He had one chance at this, one chance to guess which counter-curse would disable the trap, and he had to time it perfectly. There were two counter-curses he thought were likely to deactivate the carpet, one more likely if this was Alecto's work, one more likely if it was Amycus. Draco's mind raced, weighing the advantages of each. Alecto or Amycus, Alecto or Amycus?

Alecto.

He sucked in a deep breath, concentrated hard, and *shoved* the charm as hard as he could, knocking the writhing vines back in the split second before he dropped the shield. He slashed his wand through the air as the vines whipped back toward him and he screamed the counter-curse. One of the vines slashed at his face, barely grazing his cheekbone before the they all crumbled into little piles of colored thread.

Draco stood frozen in the middle of the room, pulse hammering, adrenaline still screaming through his veins, nerves strung taut as piano wire. He gulped in one deep breath and then another, trying to calm down as the image of himself sprawled on the dusty rug, helplessly bleeding out with no one to miss him until noon tomorrow played through his mind. Slowly, he raised one hand to his face and let it fall just enough to inspect the bright blood smudged across his fingertips. He let out a juddering sigh.

"Fuck."

This had never happened. In his six years of disabling safe house traps, this had never happened to him. Bloody Potter. Bloody *Harry*. He took a moment, utilizing Occlumency skills he hadn't needed since the war, took all of his insecurities, all of his fears and worries and questions and doubts and that one appalling terrifying marvelous little seed of hope, and put up a wall around it all. It left his mind clear, objective and analytical and ready to do the job at hand.

He finished the house in just under two hours.

He could go back to the Ministry, write up the reports for this, fill in his own statistics and maps for where this new house was located, the types of traps used and how many, cross-reference it all against his previous files and try to pin a name to it. It was definitely one of the Carrows, and all signs pointed to Alecto, but he wanted to check the other houses he'd attributed to her just to be sure.

But Draco felt jittery in the wake of his near miss with the carpet trap, awake and *alive* and needing to be doing something. On a whim, he Apparated to the middle of a quiet forest clearing and found himself standing in front of a small cabin. Not much to it, just a large front room, small kitchen and dining room, two bedrooms, plus an attic and small dirt cellar. This had been one of his own safe houses, his favorite. During the war he'd spent far more time on this one than any of the others, trapped and warded it to high hell and never told a soul about it. It had become something of a fantasy that had helped him through those last awful months, that if he ran he'd have somewhere to go. Whenever he had a little time to himself, he used to come out here and add to the wards, layering protective barriers one on top of the other until they began to meld together into a solid wall of magic.

After the war, it had taken him three days to take them all down again, leaving only a strong Muggle-repelling charm and a single ward, spun delicate as a spider web and not meant to keep people out, just let him know if anyone had been by. He'd relinquished the information about his other safe houses and their wards after he'd been accepted for Auror training, but this one he'd always kept to himself. This one was his.

Draco waved his wand and his ward sparkled briefly in the afternoon sunlight slanting through the trees. Still intact. The cabin was still his and his alone.

The wooden planks of the porch echoed hollowly as he crossed them, and the door creaked as he pushed it open. The air smelled musty and damp, a bit like wet leaves and mildew, exactly as it had the first time he'd set foot in here, and for just a second he closed his eyes and dragged the smell deep into his lungs and let himself be that scared boy again, drowning in fear and confusion and horror and regret.

Draco opened his eyes, pushed those feelings away, pushed up his sleeves, and began to cast.

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Saturday evening, Harry knocked lightly on the door of the small cottage that Ron and Hermione shared. A few seconds later he heard Ron's heavy footsteps echoing up the hallway, then the door swung open.

"Good timing," he said. "Hermione's just about done."

"Is that Harry?" Hermione's voice called from deeper in the house. "In here!"

Harry followed the sound of her voice to the spacious kitchen to find Hermione just sliding a steaming pan from the oven.

"Perfect timing," she said as she set the pan on the stovetop and turned to hug him.

For a few minutes they were all swept up in the bustle and chaos of all three of them trying to set the table and fill plates and fetch drinks, and it filled Harry with a unique sense of belonging and family, the sort he'd never found before Hogwarts.

He settled down at the table with his plate laden with baked chicken and tender roasted carrots and thick slices of warm buttered bread, and Hermione brought him a plate of salad and Ron set a pint of beer at his elbow, and as Ron and Hermione sat down at the table with him, Harry couldn't think of a single place he'd rather be than here with his friends.

"So, Harry, Ron told me about last night."

Harry nearly choked on his bite of baked chicken. "He did?"

"Of course he did. You have to admit how strange it is," she said, spearing a carrot with her fork.

Harry stared aghast at Ron, who jumped into the conversation.

"Right, Harry? You think so too, don't you, how strange it is to have Malfoy being nice? We spent a whole evening together and no one hexed anyone else. Never thought I'd see the day," he said quickly with a pointed stare.

Harry relaxed a fraction. "Oh. Right, yeah. Very strange. He hasn't been all that bad, actually."

"I find that hard to believe," Hermione said. "He was always so rotten at school. And I've seen all those articles about him in the papers. I remember how vain he was, I'd have thought all that bad press would turn him into a real nightmare to be around."

"Oh he was, he absolutely was," Harry agreed. "There were a few times this week where we nearly came to blows." He paused to chew a bite of salad. "But I'm something of a nightmare too, when the papers go on about me. So I guess I can't really hold that against him. And he's mostly calmed down, now."

"Last night was sort of surreal," Ron said. "I'd almost swear that Malfoy's finally grown up."

The conversation turned away from Draco as Hermione said how sorry she was to have missed that, and how glad she was to be off nights so she could come out next Friday night, and then complained about one particularly irritating coworker, and then Ron complained about Smith, and Harry realized for the first time in a long while he wasn't able to jump in with all that many complaints of his own. With Heppner he'd dominated the conversation. With Draco, he didn't have much to add besides, 'He keeps rearranging my files and cleaning off my desk.'

There was also, ‘He makes fun of my clothes,’ but Hermione was constantly on him about wearing something other than hoodies and tee-shirts and jeans. And ‘He makes fun of me,’ but Ron did that all the time too.

He could also have added, ‘I can’t stop thinking about snogging him or touching his ridiculously blond hair or his elegant feet or his perfect ankles,’ but somehow he didn’t think either of them would sympathize with that.

Later, after they’d cleared the dishes away and moved to the living room, Hermione looked about ready to nod off where she sat so Harry called it a night.

"I'll walk you out," Ron said, and Hermione started for the kitchen. "Hey, why don't you leave that? You cooked so let me do the washing up."

Hermione smiled. "You're the best," she said and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. "Goodnight, Harry."

As Hermione disappeared upstairs, Ron led the way to the front door. Instead of saying goodbye at the threshold, Ron joined Harry on the front porch and shut the door behind them.

"It's funny, she worked a double shift, got four hours of sleep, got up and cleaned the house and ran errands and cooked a whole meal for us, and she thinks I'm the best for offering to cast a couple of cleaning charms on the dishes."

“It’s not the effort you’re putting into cleaning up, it’s that you’re thinking of her,” Harry said, and laughed at the surprised way Ron blinked at him. “She does talk to me too, you know. It’s nice to have someone care enough to notice when you’re tired.”

Ron nodded, and a few long moments of silence stretched out between them. Harry knew what Ron was working himself up to saying, and he tried to head it off.

"I've got something to take care of tomorrow afternoon so I'm not going to make it to lunch at the Burrow. Give your mum my apologies,” he said briskly and made to step off the porch.

"Of course," Ron said. "So. About last night."

Even though Harry had seen this coming, he still didn’t want to go through it. For a moment he considered just ignoring Ron and walking off, but that would only make it worse when it finally happened. He sighed and turned back, jamming his hands into the pocket of his hoodie.

"What about last night?"

Ron just folded his arms over his chest and raised his eyebrows in an expression that told Harry he wasn’t fooled in the slightest. "What we talked about? At the end? About you fancying Malfoy?" he asked dryly.

Harry sighed again. "Oh. Right. That."

He looked up at Ron, at the tense set of Ron's face and he foresaw all the questions and lectures and suspicious sidelong glances. And Harry didn't want to deal with all of that. This thing with Draco wasn't going anywhere but it was so nice to just *feel*. He hadn't felt this sort of fierce longing for another person in ages, the kind where if he had to choose between Draco and breathing he honestly had no idea which he'd pick because they sort of felt the same. And yes, nothing would ever—*could* ever—happen between them, but so what? Couldn't he just enjoy feeling this while it lasted?

So he gave Ron a sheepish smile and the answer his friend wanted to hear.

"Yeah, about that. I guess it was just a few too many drinks and a rough day, you know? I mean, I think he's fit and all, but you were right. He's still Malfoy."

Ron relaxed visibly and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Right. Good. You had me worried there, mate." He grinned. "I'm going to go now. If I'm quick with the washing up I bet I can catch Hermione before she finishes her shower."

Harry laughed. "Good luck with that, and please keep the details to yourself."

Ron went back in the house and Harry decided to walk for a bit before Apparating home. He paused to cast a mild Warming Charm around himself, then set off down the quiet street. He felt a little bad about lying to Ron, but Ron would never have let it go otherwise. Harry probably shouldn't have gone back to the bar last night at all, but he'd been freaked out and more than a little frantic after that walk with Draco. He'd always found Draco attractive on a physical level, but he'd never thought he'd like him as anything more.

Last night was the most *human* he'd ever seen Draco, with his eyes bright and cheeks flushed warm and pink by drink and cold, his laugh loud and genuine and entrancing, his hand cool and firm in Harry's grasp, and Draco's palm fit his own so perfectly that Harry'd had to force himself to let go. All of the secrets he'd divulged gave him an edge of vulnerability that awoke something intensely protective in Harry.

And right at the end of the night, it had struck Harry how close they stood, when Draco tilted his chin down just a fraction and Harry tipped his head back and thought, 'I could kiss him, this could happen.' Draco's face had remained unreadable but his eyes had betrayed him, focused intently on Harry's mouth and widening with frightened disbelief. And so Harry had forced a smile and taken a step back and mumbled something about seeing him at work. Draco had backed up as well, stuttering out an agreement about Monday before he turned and fled up the street.

A sharp flash of disappointment lanced through Harry at Draco's implicit rejection, and that was when he knew that his innocent fascination with Draco had become a lot more potent. And a lot more dangerous. Dazed and reeling, he'd done the only thing he could think to do. He'd run straight to Ron and confessed everything. And the more Ron tried to talk him down, the more he realized how much he really wanted it.

Not that it ever could happen.

Harry sighed. Nothing to be done for it now, he supposed, so he'd just go in on Monday and see where he stood. He only hoped that Draco had forgotten about how close Harry had come to kissing him. Or at least that he wouldn't hold it against him. Harry didn't think he could stand it if he walked in to work and Draco had gone right back to holding him at arm's length again. Harry thought he could be happy with this fragile new friendship they'd agreed to on Friday night.

Maybe that would be enough.

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Narcissa was waiting beside the Floo when Draco stepped out at precisely noon on Sunday. He paused to brush a spot of ash from his light grey robes—he'd felt that traditional Wizarding fashion was more appropriate today, considering how upset his parents were likely to be over Friday's events—before he met his mother's eyes.

"Not a visit," she said in that stern voice that made Draco feel five years old again. "Not a Floo-call. Not even an owl." *I've raised you better than that*, was the unspoken ending.

Draco looked at the floor. "Sorry, Mum."

She sighed. "And you've cut your hair."

Draco stifled the urge to apologize again, because he wasn't sorry that he'd cut his hair. Mostly not sorry. Hadn't Harry said something about him having nicer hair before he'd cut it? Narcissa was watching him expectantly and Draco hurriedly pushed all thoughts of Potter out of his head. Narcissa would never stoop to something so crass as Legilimency, but despite his better efforts she'd always been able to read his face like an open book.

"I suppose Father told you what happened?" he asked, hoping to gauge just how angry Lucius was likely to be over having to rescue his son from a trap he ought to have known better than to fall into. Draco avoided thinking about the short conversation that had ensued.

"He did," Narcissa said and turned to leave the room. Draco fell into step beside her. "He was... not pleased."

Draco translated that in his mind. Lucius was furious.

Sure enough, lunch was a rehash of Draco's duties to the family and how he was throwing away his life and letting down his parents and his entire lineage. Normally Lucius waited until the main course to start in on all the ways Draco was currently disappointing him, but it was a testament to his temper that he began as the house elves served the salad.

For his mother's sake, Draco held his tongue as Lucius went on about Potter. For the most part, Lucius didn't seem to expect any sort of answer from him, and his diatribe continued unbroken. Narcissa kept casting worried little glances at her son as he poked

unenthusiastically at the mushroom-stuffed quail they'd been served for lunch. Eventually Lucius wound down.

"I don't suppose you've had a change of heart," he said, and this time it seemed he expected a response.

"No."

Lucius sighed. "After what's happened with your previous partners, aren't you worried what might happen when Potter dies while partnered with you? What do you think they'll do to you then?"

Draco thought of his conversation with Harry from Friday. "At this point in his life, I don't think he even knows how to die," he said.

Lucius sighed again. "I do hope you know what you're doing, Draco." He stood. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting."

"A meeting?" Draco echoed after his father had left the room.

Narcissa sighed and her mouth pressed into a thin, exasperated line. "He likes to get together with his little followers every so often and trade small favors. It was hard for him after the war, when he lost so much of his influence, but the Malfoy name is still worth something. I think this gives him a sense of purpose, even if they're just low-level Ministry employees." Her eyes drifted to the doorway Lucius had left through. "I believe he's trying to find an opening for himself to take another position there, to try and work his way back up."

Draco picked at the remains of his quail. "What sort of favors?" He couldn't imagine what anyone would want from Lucius, not after his long fall from the upper echelons of society.

"Mostly the sort we keep in Gringotts, I'm afraid," Narcissa said with a small sigh. "He doesn't have nearly as much influence as he once did, but Galleons never fall from grace no matter whose vault they come from. He's trying to rebuild this family the only way he knows how." She reached out and laid her hand on his elbow. "As are you."

"Except I'm doing it through hard work, honest work," Draco pointed out with more than a touch of bitterness. "He's—"

"Would you care to go for a walk?" Narcissa cut him off. "I feel like taking a walk through the gardens. The weather has warmed up so nicely."

Draco let it go. And even though April was still chilly enough that they'd need Warming Charms on their walk, he stood and offered his mother his arm, which she took and together they went to the gardens for a stroll.

They walked in silence along the path that curved gently between flower beds, fine white gravel crunching underfoot, and Draco looked out over the broad green stretch of lawn at the faint white dots of the peacocks in the distance. Draco had always hated those horrible things, miserable ill-tempered beasts that they were, and they shat everywhere. But Lucius insisted

they stay. There had always been white peacocks on the Manor lawns, he would say, and so shall there always be. When the Manor finally fell to Draco, he would take great pleasure in removing them. Every last one of them. With extreme prejudice. One of his earliest childhood memories was fleeing across the lawn as fast as his little legs could carry him, as one of those wretched beasts chased after him and pecked at his ankles. Draco still had a scar from a particularly vicious peck.

"You seem preoccupied," Narcissa said as they passed the tulip beds where the first pointed tips of furled green leaves were poking determinedly through the soil.

"Not particularly," he replied as lightly as he could.

"Draco," she chided gently. "I'm your mother. You can't lie to me."

And so he told her the truth, or at least as much of it as he felt comfortable revealing. He talked about the scathing articles and arguing with Potter, about being trapped in that small hot room with him on Friday and thinking he might die there and confiding almost everything he'd ever kept hidden, and how later that night Potter had become Harry and now they were supposed to be friends, and how absurdly frightened that made Draco feel.

Narcissa remained silent until they passed the lilac bushes. "I remember how upset you were on your first day at Hogwarts. You'd wanted so badly for him to be your friend."

"Yes," Draco said sarcastically. "Dreams really do come true."

Narcissa only laughed, a high tinkling sound that reminded him of a chandelier, and Draco felt a little lighter for hearing it. Narcissa didn't laugh as often as he thought she should.

"I'm sure it will all be fine," she said and gave his arm a little squeeze. "You are your father's son, and as such you are brilliant and ambitious. But more importantly, you learn from your mistakes." She stared out over the Manor grounds. "That was one lesson he's never learned."

Draco nodded slowly. "I see," he said, mind already wandering.

He'd gone about things all wrong with Potter in school, made mistake after mistake. Draco thought back on his Hogwarts interactions with Potter. The insults, the bragging, all the times he'd picked fights with Potter in what he saw now, looking back with the benefit of age and experience, were some truly piteous cries for attention.

If he were to take all of that and add it up and then do the opposite, it mostly seemed to boil down to, 'Don't be an arse.' Draco thought he could handle that.

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At five minutes to four on Sunday afternoon, Harry stood on the sidewalk in front of number three Privet Drive, concealed under a strong Disillusionment Charm. He waited patiently for

a few minutes.

At precisely four o'clock, the door to number four Privet Drive swung open and Uncle Vernon stepped out. He paused to close and lock the door behind him before he set out down the sidewalk, walking the ten minutes to the local pub where he'd drink exactly two pints and watch whatever match happened to be playing on the TVs there. At ten minutes to six, he'd stand up and walk the ten minutes back home, arriving at exactly six o'clock, just in time to sit down to the supper that Aunt Petunia had cooked.

He certainly hadn't changed his routine any; Harry hoped that Aunt Petunia hadn't changed hers either. Just after Uncle Vernon left, she'd put the kettle on and make herself a cup of tea. Then she'd sit down on the sofa and read a few chapters of her current trashy romance. She'd finish her tea in thirty minutes, leaving her plenty of time to prepare the Sunday meal.

Today the bodice ripper would just have to wait. Harry dropped the charm and crossed the street, walked up the neat brick path and mounted the three shallow steps to the front door where he paused to take stock of himself. He'd dressed nicely, in a pair of grey trousers, white button-down shirt and warm red wool cardigan, and even made a small effort to tame his hair. He raised his fist, took in and released a deep breath, and knocked, the sound of his knuckles striking wood barely louder than his heart knocking against his ribs.

After a long minute during which Harry seriously thought about Disapparating, a hazy shape rose up behind the small glass panel in the door. The lock clicked back and the door swung open.

"May I help—" she began pleasantly, then her mouth dropped open in shock. "Harry."

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Erm. Hi."

Petunia looked much the same as he remembered her, just with a few more wrinkles around her eyes and a little more grey in her hair. For a moment they just stared at each other, then Petunia blinked rapidly and her manners took over. She edged the door open a bit more.

"Won't you come in?"

Harry let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding and nodded. He stepped into the entryway and let her close the door behind him.

"I've just got some water on for tea. Why don't you wait for me in the living room?" Petunia said.

Harry nodded again and went to take a seat on the sofa as she fled back down the hall to the kitchen. He suspected they could both use a moment to recover from the shock of him turning up on her doorstep. He hadn't intended to do more than poke his head in and get what he'd come for, but sheer curiosity won out. If Petunia seemed willing to visit with him, he might as well see what she had to say.

He looked around the room that was so familiar and so foreign all at once. There was still that same crack running along the ceiling, but they'd had new carpets put in. Same sofa and

coffee table and chairs, but a new television set.

After a few minutes, Petunia returned with two cups of tea and a shoebox. She set the shoebox on the coffee table, then handed one cup of tea to Harry and sat on the opposite side of the sofa with the other. Harry didn't know what to say, so he sipped at his tea, and found it just as he liked.

"You remember how I take my tea," he said in surprise.

"Of course I do. Too much sugar, not enough milk." She took a sip from her own cup. "I have to admit it's quite a surprise, seeing you here. I was sure I'd never see you again."

Harry couldn't tell if she meant that as a good thing or a bad thing.

"Honestly, I never meant to come back," he admitted. "But on Friday… I nearly died on Friday, and had a truly weird conversation with someone I always thought I'd hated, and. Um. It was just very… Well. I just thought I'd come and… see."

Petunia's eye had grown wide. "Nearly died? In an accident?"

"Sort of. It's complicated." Harry took another gulp of his tea. "I have a dangerous job. That sort of thing happens more often than I'd like it to. Um. The nearly dying, I mean."

"What do you do?"

Harry couldn't tell if she was really curious what he did or if it was just surprise that forced the question out, but he answered her honestly. "I work for the DMLE, in their Auror division. Um, that's Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I'm basically one of the people they send out for the high-risk stuff," Harry said. "I'm quite good at it. Well, most of the time." Now she was staring at him the same way he'd seen people stare at dogs they're not quite sure are friendly or vicious, so he asked, "How's Dudley?"

Petunia's face softened instantly. "He's doing quite well for himself. He's an accountant now, and just bought himself a flat. He's getting married next year."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Harry said, because that's what he was supposed to say. "Congratulations."

Petunia lifted her teacup halfway to her lips, but set it back in the saucer without drinking. "Are… you seeing anyone?"

Harry hesitated, but didn't see an easy way to explain that he was sort-of-seeing another man, so he just said, "Er, no."

"Ah," said Petunia, and they lapsed into an awkward silence.

Harry drank more tea.

"I…" Petunia began, and coughed once. She set down her cup of tea and picked up the shoebox. "I didn't expect you'd ever come back here, but I'll admit that a part of me was

hoping you would."

Despite himself, despite his whole childhood, despite *everything*, an excited little tremor ran through Harry. "Really?"

"Yes," Petunia said.

She held out the shoebox, and Harry put his own cup of tea on the table and took it from her. Something inside it slid and clinked. Harry removed the lid, and looked down to find broken porcelain.

He recognized it instantly, and how could he not from a decade of Christmases and birthdays and Easters? This was the decorative plate with hand-painted roses that Petunia always piled high with homemade desserts. Dudley always stole cookies from it when her back was turned and blamed it on Harry.

"It was my grandmother's," Petunia continued. "I'd hoped to one day pass it along to Dudley as a wedding gift, but I was washing it and it slipped and… I was hoping maybe you could…" She trailed off and swooshed one hand through the air.

Harry stared down into the shoebox. "You want me to fix it," he said dully. He felt like a fool because for one ludicrous second he'd been stupid enough to think she'd wanted to see him.

"If you don't mind," Petunia said.

"Not at all," Harry replied.

And he smiled at her, a great big fake smile with enough of an edge to it that had Petunia flinching back. Unceremoniously, he upended the shoebox over the coffee table, shards of porcelain clattering together, some bouncing off onto the carpet, some breaking into smaller pieces. He pulled out his wand, snapped it at the broken plate and barked, "*Reparo!*" The pieces flew up and jammed themselves back together, fusing with a faint flash of light. Harry caught the plate in midair and offered it to Petunia.

"There you go, good as new."

"Oh," she said softly as she took it from him. She turned it over and then over again, slowly running her hands across its smooth surface. "Oh, it's perfect."

She was staring at that stupid plate more lovingly than she'd ever looked at Harry in his life, and for one long moment he wanted nothing more than to snatch it out of her hands and break it again. Instead he put his wand away, swallowed down the last of his tea, and stood up.

"I'm afraid I can't stay," he said briskly, suddenly wanting nothing more than to leave this house and never come back. "I really only stopped by to get my book."

Petunia looked up at him, confused. "Your book?"

"Yes. My book. I kept it hidden in my—in the cupboard under the stairs. I'd like it back."

Petunia stood as well, watching him warily, clutching the plate against her chest. “Of course.”

Harry stalked out of the living room and into the hall, and Petunia left off fondling her plate to trail after him. He pulled open that little door and stooped down to squeeze inside. It was dusty and crowded with boxes and dark dark dark and a thousand painful memories of crying alone and hungry and unloved and unwanted threatened to overwhelm him. Harry stumbled back, caught himself against the wall opposite and tried to catch his breath. He tried to step forward again but his feet wouldn’t obey.

Here he was, twenty-four and an Auror and the Savior of the whole bloody world and unable to make himself put his head back into a stupid harmless cupboard. He looked over to find Petunia staring at him, her expression caught between revulsion and guilt, and Harry felt his face heat with shame and anger and he wanted to grab her and shake her and scream, ‘This is what you’ve done to me, do you see what you’ve done?’ Instead, he whipped out his wand and snarled, “*Accio* book!”

A tattered paperback flew out from the depths of the cupboard and he caught it easily. He put his wand away again and turned to face his aunt.

“I’ll be off now.”

She was watching him as if he were an unfamiliar dog again, and she nodded and eased back to the door in a no-sudden-movements sort of way. “I think that would be best,” Petunia said, her voice gentle and even in a way he thought was meant to be soothing. “It was nice to see you again, Harry. But I think it’s best if you don’t come back.” She opened the door.

Harry stepped through. “Believe me,” he said, mildly surprised that he didn’t sound angry. Just resigned. “I don’t intend to.”

Chapter 7

At precisely nine o'clock on Monday morning, Draco stood in Shacklebolt's office. He'd wordlessly handed his boss the stack of paperwork and incident reports he'd done up on Saturday and waited anxiously while Shacklebolt read through it. Shacklebolt took his time, dark brows drawing lower and lower over his eyes until he'd nearly reached a scowl.

Finally he dropped the papers onto his desk and stared hard at Draco, and Draco struggled not to fidget beneath the piercing gaze. He tipped his chin up just a fraction higher and clenched his jaw.

"This happened on Friday?" Shacklebolt asked at last.

Draco gave a terse nod. "Yes, Sir."

"Then would you care to explain to me why, Auror Malfoy, I am just learning about it now?" Shacklebolt's voice was low and dangerous.

"Sir," Draco said carefully. "I thought it best to speak to you about Friday's events in person. And I have a proposal to assure that this sort of thing doesn't happen again. You see, in a functional partnership, both parties must be able to rely upon each other unreservedly. And although I trust Auror Potter in every other situation, I feel that when it comes to taking care of safe houses, he simply doesn't—"

"You trust him?" Shacklebolt interrupted. His fingers tapped the surface of his desk, one-two-three-four.

"Of course I trust him; he's Harry Potter," Draco said, and a hint of irritation seeped into his voice. He swallowed hard and inwardly winced.

He expected his outburst to be met with a quick reprimand. But instead Shacklebolt regarded him with an entirely unexpected sort of quiet satisfaction. Before Draco could ponder that, Shacklebolt said, "Go on, then."

Draco jumped into the rest of the speech he'd been rehearsing in his head all morning. "As I was saying, Auror Potter simply doesn't have the necessary skills for me to rely on him keeping me safe while disabling the wards and traps on Death Eater safe houses. If he's going to be partnered with me, then he'll undoubtedly be accompanying me to more of them. And so I need to bring his skills up to a level where he'll be of use to me." Draco produced a second folder and handed it across the desk. "You'll see there are all of my lesson plans and goals and a time line I've set for achieving them, as well as the risk factors and the location I've selected for his training. All I need is your approval, Sir."

Shacklebolt took his time leafing through this new folder, and after a few minutes set it aside and watched Draco calmly. "Everything seems to be in order. Very well then, Auror Malfoy. I'll approve your request."

Draco nodded quickly. He hadn't expected Shacklebolt to give in so quickly, but he'd take it. It was about time something went right. "Thank you, Sir."

Draco turned to leave.

"Just one more thing," Shacklebolt said. "When Harry gets here, send him to my office. There are a few things I need to discuss with him."

Draco nodded. "Of course."

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Evidently the fact that Harry and Draco had agreed to be friends didn't mean they had to stop screaming at each other, oh joy.

"And I had to find out from Kingsley that my own partner has been going around behind my back!"

That belatedly struck Harry as a bit rich, considering Kingsley had called him into his office to discuss all the ways in which the events on Friday might be Draco's fault while Harry had tried just as hard to take full responsibility for them. Eventually Kingsley had sighed in that way that meant he thought Harry was being deliberately thick and advised him to keep his wits about him. The phrase 'constant vigilance' didn't actually come up, but it was a near thing. Harry had again tried to convince his boss that Malfoy was innocent, and Kingsley had responded by rehashing Draco's entire history as a Death Eater as well as his family's predilection for all things Dark Arts. It'd been a very long and very frustrating conversation for both of them.

"I'm not going around behind your back, Potter. If I were then I wouldn't have told you about it," Draco insisted and folded his arms over his chest, and Harry wanted to hit him. Apparently being friends with the stupid git didn't mean that Harry had to stop wanting to punch his teeth in, either. Wonderful.

"But you *didn't* tell me about it. I just said I had to hear from Kingsley that you *went behind my back* and finished off the safe house on your own!"

"Well I was going to tell you," Draco shot back. "And it's not as if I needed your help with finishing it up. If anything it was far easier to do when I didn't have to babysit a great tromping git who *can't follow simple instructions*."

"I didn't say you needed any help with it," Harry ground out, ignoring the dig. "I'm saying you shouldn't have done it by yourself. You're going in there and messing around with some really dark stuff. What if something had gone wrong?"

"I assure you I'm perfectly capable. I've been doing this alone for six years now."

Harry jammed his hands into his pockets so he wouldn't do anything stupid with them, like wrap them around Draco's neck and *squeeze*. "Well it only takes once, doesn't it?"

Draco pulled a face like Harry was the one being ridiculous. "I'm fine, Potter, nothing happened."

And there it was. His voice went just a little too flat and his eyes flickered up to a point just to the left of Harry's head. For a second, Harry could only stare dumbly at him.

"Liar!" Harry shouted. "You're a liar, Malfoy!"

Draco actually flinched back and his eyes went wide just before they darted briefly to the side again. "I'm not—"

"Liar!" Harry yelled again. "What happened? I know something happened, and you know I'm not going to let go of this until you tell me." He folded his arms over his chest, mirroring Draco's pose.

For a few seconds, Draco only stared back at him. Then he sighed and dropped his arms to his sides. "Fine, fine. I misjudged a trap, that's all. I was… distracted by something partway through casting the diagnostic charms and I missed one. As you can see, I'm fine."

"What happened?" Harry asked, gentler now.

"Enchanted vines on a carpet. Ugly, chintzy thing, too, covered in roses, and someone had spelled the roses alive and they attacked me. I cast the counter-curse and they turned back into thread." Draco shifted slightly. "I'm *fine*," he insisted a bit too forcefully.

Harry could read between the lines. "You weren't fine then?"

Draco studied the polished black toes of his shoes. "It was… rather a closer call than I'd have liked."

Harry took that as Malfoy-speak for 'I nearly died again.'

"And don't you see that's why I'm so upset? Believe it or not, I don't actually want you dead," Harry said and it was a struggle to keep from shouting. "Draco, I want to help."

Draco looked up at that. "That's what I'm trying get you to do. Didn't Shacklebolt talk to you about your training?"

Harry shrugged. "Might've done. I don't recall much of what he said after he told me you finished off the safe house, honestly." He thought he remembered something about additional training but mostly it was just blah blah blah, Malfoy's probably evil. Harry didn't understand why Kingsley was so fixated on blaming Draco for everything despite Harry telling him that Draco wasn't at fault for Friday's events.

Draco nodded. "As I said, it's easier for me to deal with a safe house on my own without having to babysit you while doing it. And," he continued loudly before Harry could interrupt.

“That means that you need to be trained so you’re not a liability.” He paused and shrugged. “It’ll be nice to have a second person helping me.”

“You’re going to train me in disabling dark magic?” Harry asked. Suddenly Kingsley’s concern made a lot more sense. Harry briefly regretted yelling at him, because from Kingsley’s perspective it probably did look like Draco was setting up something very bad.

“Do you know of any other Death Eaters willing to hold your hand?” Draco shot back.

Harry’s eyes dropped down to Draco’s hands despite himself and he couldn’t help but think of how Draco’s palm felt pressed to his own after pub night on Friday. He wrenched his gaze back up to Draco’s face and cleared his throat, and prayed that his cheeks didn’t look as warm as they felt. “When do we start?”

Draco smiled. “As soon as we can get there.”

One Side-Along Apparition later, Harry found himself standing in a forest and staring at a small wood-framed cabin.

“A bit of explanation before we begin,” Draco said, slipping into that clipped but cheerful tone that Harry knew heralded a lecture. Hermione sounded exactly the same when she was gearing up about something that really excited her. “I told you a bit about safe houses before. I probably should have gone through it more in depth and given you some amount of training on Friday, but I assumed you could be trusted to follow simple instructions.”

“Sorry,” Harry mumbled, and Draco waved a hand dismissively, apparently too caught up in hearing the sound of his own voice to bother with apologies just then.

“Each house is warded and trapped to keep people out. Should they get in, the traps serve to give any Death Eaters in residence enough of a head start to safely escape. If a Death Eater ever needs to use a safe house, there is a spell to cast which will mark out a safe path through the house and lead to the one room that isn’t trapped. That way if he is injured or otherwise incapacitated, he doesn’t need to worry about dodging or disabling traps. If there is a timed trap in the house, the counter won’t start as long as he doesn’t leave the path or the untrapped room.”

“Makes sense,” Harry nodded.

“I have eschewed the safe path and untrapped room for the purposes of this exercise, since you circumventing the traps altogether rather defeats the point, and the cabin is small enough that I didn’t want to waste an entire room,” Draco continued. “I thought we should start with a general understanding of what areas or things in a house are the most likely to be cursed. As such, I have placed a number of traps in areas you’re likely to encounter them in a real safe house. None of the curses I have set are lethal.”

“Thanks for that,” Harry muttered but he was eagerly looking toward the cabin.

He thought Draco would continue to lecture for a bit, and was caught off guard when Draco said, “Have at it,” and flapped a hand at the cabin.

Harry eyed him suspiciously. “That’s it? Just, have at it, good luck?”

“I don’t recall wishing you luck, but if you’d like it, sure. Good luck.”

“Really, you’re just going to turn me loose in there?” Harry had a hard time reconciling the fact that Draco, the same man who spent hours organizing and reorganizing his filing and who griped at Harry for being even one minute late in the morning and who could rattle off rules and regulations at the drop of a hat and who coordinated his outfits down to his damn *underpants*, had such a Hagrid-esque teaching plan. ‘Have at it’ hadn’t always worked out so well in Care of Magical Creatures, and Draco of all people should know that.

Draco gave an unconcerned shrug. “As I said before, there’s nothing lethal in there. And you strike me as the type of person who learns best by doing.”

Harry couldn’t argue with that, because he really did learn best by doing, and if Draco said that there was nothing harmful in the cabin then Harry believed him. So he just nodded as he walked up to the steps and crossed the worn boards of the porch. He reached for the doorknob. As Harry’s fingers closed around the knob, Draco casually reached up and put his fingers in his ears.

The massive concussion actually knocked Harry back a step or two, and for a few seconds all he could do was stagger drunkenly, one hand clapped to the side of his head, his other arm thrown out for the wall of the cabin. He found it and propped himself up, dazed. Someone was blowing a whistle nearby, and it took Harry a few seconds to work out that it was just his ears ringing.

“WHAT THE FUCK, MALFOY?”

Draco, the utter bastard, gave him a great big cheerful grin and said something. At least Harry assumed he said something. His mouth moved but Harry still couldn’t hear anything over the ringing in his ears.

“I CAN’T HEAR A FUCKING WORD YOU’RE—SERIOUSLY, MALFOY, WHAT THE FUCK?”

Draco’s mouth moved again.

“I AM GOING TO KILL YOU,” said Harry.

He would, too, just as soon as his head stopped spinning enough that he felt that he could remove himself from the wall of the cabin without falling over. Draco’s mouth moved and he waved his wand, and both of Harry’s ears popped and his head quieted.

“What the fuck,” he said again, because honestly it bore repeating.

Draco joined him on the porch. “I told you, the doors are always trapped. A Concussive Curse is a sunny spring day compared to the curses on the real safe houses.”

Harry glowered at him and tried to bear in mind that he shouldn’t hit his partner. “You said there wasn’t anything dangerous in here.”

“I said nothing lethal, and you’re not dead, are you?” Draco pointed out reasonably. “The purpose of this training is to prepare you for the real thing. As such, there need to be very definite consequences for failure.”

“And so it was necessary to blow my ears out?”

“Should I have trapped it with a Cheering Charm, then? Perhaps a nice Tickling Charm?” Draco raised his eyebrows. “You need legitimate danger to provide a strong incentive to avoid risky behavior.”

“Let me get this straight, because I want to be very sure I’m understanding what you want me to do,” Harry said. “You want me to go in there, where you have set up all sorts of horrible shit—“

“Strong incentives,” Draco corrected. “I have set up strong incentives for you to not be an idiot.”

“You’re an arsehole,” Harry ground out. “Who has set up *strong incentives* for me to punch you in the face.”

Now Draco was frowning. “You’ve being very childish about this.”

“I was recently deafened. I think I’m being very restrained, given that,” Harry snapped.

Draco rolled his eyes. “*Temporarily* deafened. Honestly, Potter, don’t you think you’re being a little dramatic? Just go in there.”

“What, so I can stumble around blindly and set off all the other curses you’ve set?”

“Well the general idea is for you to avoid them.” Draco didn’t roll his eyes that time, but Harry could tell he wanted to.

Harry growled in frustration. “And how am I supposed to do that?”

“Everything in there responds to the standard set of diagnostic charms. I’m not cruel enough to throw the really tricky ones at you for your first time. Just run through the set and you should be fine.” Draco sounded a little exasperated.

Harry glared at him and flicked his wand so the door banged open. He nearly stepped inside, but paused and took the time to cast the set of diagnostic charms. The third one he cast on the floor just inside the door sparked red. Harry glanced at Draco who gave him an approving little nod.

He crouched down just outside the door and leaned forward a little to get a better look. The floor looked fine, if a little dusty. He cast another spell that sparked red again.

“Is it these floor boards here?” he asked and glanced up at Draco.

Draco’s face lit up in a pleased little smile. “Yes, exactly. Can you tell what it is?”

Harry squinted and waved his wand again. Now that he knew what to look for, he could sense the curse laid neatly over the boards but couldn't tell anything else about it. He shook his head. "Sorry, I was always rubbish at this part."

Draco crouched down beside him and his elbow brushed Harry's arm as he waved his own wand at the curse in an unfamiliar incantation, and this time the threads of magic lit up and stayed glowing. He tucked his wand away again and pointed. "You see there? You can see an echo of the wand movements. And just there, if you reach out, it's a bit like Legilimency, if you sort of *push* your mind out to it, you can feel it reach back and then you can get a read on what it wants to do."

"What was that you just did?" Harry asked. "That's not a standard diagnostic charm."

For a moment, all Draco did was stare at him. "Yes, Potter, it absolutely is a standard diagnostic charm." He had his talking-to-a-simpleton voice on again. "How on earth did you manage to pass the Objects of Ill Intent portion of your Auror training?"

Harry shrugged a shoulder. In truth, Kingsley had given him a pass on it because of his work with the Horcruxes. Just after the war they'd been eager to rush him through training and get him into the field as soon as they could. Harry hadn't argued at the time, but now he sort of wished he had.

He expected Draco to press the matter, but instead he just sighed and took out his wand and ran through the wand movement and incantation again. Harry repeated it himself and then sat back on his heels and studied the spell. He looked where Draco had pointed and saw… yes. There was a swish and a little loop that looked vaguely familiar. Following Draco's advice, he mentally reached for it and felt it reach back, and even though nothing actually touched him, he couldn't suppress a shudder of revulsion. Dark magic always felt cold and shrill and dry to Harry, like nails on a chalkboard or dead leaves being scraped down the sidewalk by a slow gust of wind. He forced himself to ignore it and kept reaching.

"Something about my legs?" He glanced at Draco.

Draco smiled. "Yes. Can you tell what it is?"

Harry thought, running through his mental catalogue of spells. "Jellylegs Jinx?"

"Close. It's a Leglocker Curse, actually," Draco said. "Now disable it."

That, Harry knew how to do. He'd never been particularly good at disabling spells, but he knew the basics. The lines of magic had begun to fade so he recast the spell Draco had taught him, and a few minutes later he pulled loose the last thread of magic and felt it dissolve.

"Got it," he said, standing. "Are there typically spells laid just inside the door? Seems like a hassle if someone needed to get to a safe place in a hurry."

"Well," Draco said and carefully didn't look at Harry. "That was me, actually. I wanted to make sure you'd hit this one if you missed the one on the doorknob."

For a moment Harry could only gape at him. “Let me get this straight. You wanted to make sure that if I avoided deafening myself, I would fall on my face instead?”

“I needed to prove my point,” Draco insisted. “These places are meant to be dangerous. I wanted to start you off by adequately demonstrating the consequences of carelessness.”

For a moment Harry *really* wanted to hit him, which he felt would adequately demonstrate the consequences of fucking with one’s partner. For a moment, he marveled at the fact that it was possible to want to both punch someone in the face and snog them breathless at the same time, but that was just Draco, wasn’t it? Always pushing Harry to his limits in new and exciting ways.

Then he forced himself to take a deep breath, then another. Draco didn’t have to do this, but he’d spent a whole chunk of his free time setting this up, and now he was here helping Harry through it and teaching him charms he should have learned in training, and doing it all with a patience that Harry probably didn’t deserve. After a few seconds, the urge to hit Draco drained away, leaving only the urge to kiss him. And Harry couldn’t do anything about that one.

So he just sighed. “Shall we continue?”

Draco smiled and gestured into the cabin. “After you.”

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An hour later, they’d made it through the living room and dining room and had just stepped into the kitchen. Despite Harry’s increasingly petulant grumblings, he was doing quite well. Certainly better than Draco had thought he’d do after he muddled his way through sensing and disabling the Leglocker Curse. And though he certainly didn’t appear to have a natural aptitude for this sort of delicate magic, Draco thought it wouldn’t take him long to reach the point where he’d be a help rather than a hindrance. But then, Harry had always been a quick study.

Especially when he set his mind to something, Draco mused, watching as Harry determinedly plucked at the faint threads of a Revulsion Jinx that Draco had laid on a cabinet. He’d caught that one right away.

As Harry finished up, Draco let his eyes slip to the stove sitting against the opposite wall. He’d done his best to recreate the unusual cascading trap he’d found on the oven at the last safe house. He’d laid a strong tag of dark magic on the back door, then set up a small series of harmless little jinxes over the tiles leading from the door to the oven, any of which would set off a cascading reaction. Instead of a curse to turn the kitchen into a firestorm, he’d set up another Concussive Curse as the main event. He watched eagerly as Harry cast another series of diagnostic charms and found the dark magic on the back door. He stepped closer to get a better look at it.

Draco put his fingers in his ears again.

Even so, the blast was loud enough to hurt. Draco murmured the minor healing charm that set his own ears to rights while Harry reeled, and by the time Harry had recovered enough to aim a truly imposing glare at Draco, he was leaning casually against the doorframe.

“WHAT THE FUCKING FUCK, MALFOY?”

Draco couldn’t keep from smiling. “I didn’t think you’d indulge me by setting off a second one.” He watched Harry clinging to the countertop for a moment and his smile grew. “Thanks ever so.”

“YOU’RE AN ENORMOUS BASTARD ARSEHOLE.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “And despite your filthy mouth, I find I’d still quite like to kiss you.”

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU’D DO THIS TO ME A SECOND TIME.”

“There’s another Concussive Curse on the sink; we could go for three.” He didn’t bother to hide another smile.

“OH WAIT, YES I CAN. BECAUSE YOU’RE A HORRIBLE SON OF A BITCH AND I HATE YOU SO MUCH.”

“I don’t think you think that at all. In fact, I think you rather like me,” Draco said as Harry continued to swear at him. “Let’s find out for sure, shall we?”

He reached out and laid his index finger over Harry’s lips. Harry fell silent immediately. After a moment Draco removed his finger, taking care to drag his fingertip lightly over Harry’s bottom lip as he did so. Harry stopped breathing.

“Interesting,” he said, struggling to keep a bland expression on his face. He pointed his wand at Harry. “Abra cadabra,” he said.

Of course it didn’t do anything.

Harry stared at him. “I DON’T THINK IT WORKED.”

“That’s because I’m not quite done with you yet,” Draco said and stepped close to Harry.

He reached up and took Harry by the chin and turned his head to one side. He pretended to inspect Harry’s ear, brushing a lock of Harry’s hair aside as he did so, and was faintly surprised to find it much softer than he’d thought it’d be. He’d imagined it’d be coarse and wiry, especially given its propensity to ignore gravity, but it was surprisingly glossy beneath his fingertips. He had to take a moment to wrestle down the urge to run his hand through Harry’s hair properly before he used his grip on Harry’s chin to tip Harry’s head to the other side so he could repeat the process with his other ear. This time he let his fingers brush over the earlobe and trail lightly down the corner of Harry’s jaw.

Harry sucked in a breath and looked everywhere but at Draco.

“Very interesting,” Draco said before he stepped back and brandished his wand again. “Sana Tinnitus.”

Harry scowled at him and rubbed at his ears. “You’re still a bastard.”

With his fingers still itching to slide through Harry’s hair, Draco let that go. Instead, he carefully reset the trap as Harry watched, then walked Harry through identifying and disarming it. He thought maybe this was a bit much for Harry’s first time, but as he watched Harry work at disabling it with renewed determination, he decided he was right to set it. Harry was always at his best when he was thrown into the deep end of things.

That didn’t keep him from heaving a dramatic sigh when he finished. “I don’t see how you can stand to do this all the time.” He cast more diagnostic charms and the window over the sink lit up red.

Draco shrugged. “It’s fun.”

“Fun?” Harry stared at him as if he’d just announced that in his spare time he liked to waltz naked through a pen of hippogriffs with raw steaks tied to his arse.

“Yes, fun. I adore a good puzzle, and some of these traps really are fiendishly clever. I like taking them apart.” He watched as Harry picked at the threads of magic wound round the window catch. “You know, when I was young I wanted to be a Curse-Breaker.” Harry paused in his casting and Draco leaned closer to inspect the window.

“A Curse-Breaker?” Harry’s voice sounded oddly strangled and Draco looked up to find Harry watching him with startled fascination.

Draco nodded. “Freelance, of course. I’ve no desire to tie myself to Gringotts like that.”

“Freelance?” Harry managed. He looked even more startled.

“Yes, freelance,” Draco said, starting to get a little annoyed and the way Potter was just repeating everything he said. “I always found it terribly romantic.”

“Romantic?” Inexplicably, Potter was blushing now.

Draco snorted. “Not the hearts and flowers sort of romantic. It’s just that when I was eight, wandering the world and selling my wand to the highest bidder sounded dashingly roguish. You know. Romantic.” He stared at Potter, trying to work out what he’d said that could possibly have him looking so off-kilter. “What on earth is wrong with you?”

“Quite a lot, I imagine,” Potter said, and coughed once. “So why didn’t you?”

“Become a Curse-Breaker?” Draco shrugged. He’d seriously considered doing it after Hogwarts, when a fresh start in a new country where his name wasn’t already a black mark against him sounded so appealing. But he found that he wasn’t able to abandon his mother, especially if it meant leaving Lucius to rebuild the family’s reputation by himself. “It’s complicated. But mostly I didn’t want to leave England. This is my home and I don’t think I would like seeing it only a few weeks out of the year.” He shrugged again.

Harry's mouth rounded but no sound came out. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Oh."

He turned back to the window catch and yanked at the threads of magic a little too sharply, which set off the Slime Jinx Draco had set there. Harry's face twisted into an expression of disgust as a sticky slime coated his palm and dripped on the floor. Pausing to scowl at Draco, Harry reached for the taps of the sink and Draco couldn't hide an anticipatory smile.

He put his fingers in his ears.

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Harry returned from lunch on Tuesday feeling much better than he had when he'd gone. They'd gone out to the cabin again, and Harry had found that at some point yesterday evening Draco had gone back and laid out a whole new array of traps. Harry thought he'd done better disabling this batch than yesterday's. He'd only deafened himself twice. Draco had been terribly amused both times, taking great and obvious pleasure in telling Harry god only knew what while he couldn't hear it.

Speaking of Draco, Harry glanced around the empty office but didn't see any sign that his partner had returned from lunch himself. That was odd. Draco was such a stickler for time, and Harry couldn't recall him coming back late from lunch or his mid-afternoon tea break even once in the weeks they'd been assigned together.

He took advantage of his Draco-free time to scribble a few notes in his file for Kingsley. Harry had been doing more research into the cases Draco had been working when his partners were killed, searching for any patterns or similarities between them. But he couldn't find any. The first two deaths looked like accidents; the second two were clearly murder. The first three cases, the ones where investigation had resulted in death, were all MLEP overflow, while Parsons had died while off the clock, and the only open case she and Draco had at that time was a consult on a potions case involving improperly brewed Veritaserum. But that didn't necessarily mean anything. Most of Draco's cases were MLEP overflow, and he'd been entirely uninvolved in the potions case aside from doing a bit of research. Harry sighed and finished up his notes, made a copy, and sent it along to Kingsley.

He was beginning to feel increasingly guilty about spying on Draco like this, but it hadn't taken him all that long to come to terms with it. Kingsley clearly thought Draco was guilty, which, while frustrating, wasn't something Harry could really blame him for, given Kingsley's long history with the Malfoy family through not one but two wars. But it meant that Harry was Draco's only hope of being proved innocent, and to do that he had to keep investigating, which meant giving Kingsley reports so he wouldn't be taken off the case. Besides, Draco never had to find out about this. Harry would prove him innocent, and that would be that.

Draco still hadn't returned as Harry tucked the bright orange folder away into his satchel. Then he gave his bag a much-needed cleaning out, eliminating a whole pile of crumpled

receipts and broken quills. He pulled out the battered copy of *The Once And Future King* he'd liberated from number four Privet Drive and set it aside on his desk. Probably shouldn't have even brought it to work, but it had been on his table that morning and he'd tucked it into his bag without thinking.

Harry set the satchel aside and frowned as he glanced at the clock. Where was Draco? Harry was just considering going off to search for him when the door opened and Draco appeared, brandishing a folder.

"Well, Potter, I've got good news and bad news for you. Which would you like to hear first?" His voice had that cheerful sound he only got when he was about to say something Harry really wouldn't like.

Harry sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Good news, I guess. That way if you really cheer me up, you'll get the pleasure of crushing my good spirits afterward."

Draco snickered and didn't disagree. "We've been pulled in on the Verve case."

Harry perked up at that. "Verve? Really?"

Everyone had been trying to get in on the Verve case. Verve was a new black-market potion that had been increasing in popularity recently. It gave the user an unparalleled surge of energy and joy, but was highly addictive and very quickly caused a wide array of negative physical side-effects. The Aurors hadn't had much luck in tracking down the source of this new potion, but when it finally broke it would be big.

"Oh yes. They want our help on it very badly." Draco sauntered forward and propped one hip against the side of Harry's desk. "Well, my help. But you're getting dragged along with me. They caught me coming back from lunch, and they asked me to do a little research about alternative ingredients. There's a meeting tomorrow morning that we need to attend, so we'll have to bump back our training session at the cabin to the afternoon, I'm afraid."

Harry didn't think that an early meeting or postponing their training was the bad news Draco had promised. He allowed himself a little sigh before he asked, "And what's the bad news?"

With another of those terribly cheerful grins that heralded something awful in Harry's immediate future, Draco said, "This." With a muttered Finite he dropped the handful of folders he held. No longer bound by the Compression Charm, they expanded rapidly, and the daunting stack landed on Harry's desk with a loud *whump* that shook the floor.

Harry blinked at the pile. "That?"

"This," Draco said and gestured grandly at the folders. "*This* is a list of all of the ingredients ordered from Unalloyed, the most popular supplier of potions ingredients in England. We're going through their customer records for the last six months and marking any time these ingredients were sold." He slapped a parchment down on top of the stack. Draco's precise cursive script covered nearly every inch of it.

“Seriously?” Harry managed. He could tell by the way Draco's smile widened that he must look sufficiently crushed. Lovely. At least one of them was happy, then.

“Oh yes. Then we get to cross-reference them with other suppliers to find out if any one person happens to be ordering all of the things they need to brew Verve.”

“Oh,” said Harry as his brief dreams of actual Auror fieldwork disintegrated. He slumped in his chair.

“Get to it, Potter,” Draco said with unreserved cheer as he wandered back to his side of the office.

Harry nearly threw the stack of folders at Draco’s head, but was distracted by the way that Draco’s fingers made short work of the buttons on his robes. He shrugged out of them and hung them on the coat hook by the door. He was wearing blue again, a silver and blue striped waistcoat over a royal blue shirt that made his skin practically glow.

“Can I help you with something?” Draco asked, a smirk playing over his mouth, and Harry realized he was staring.

“No. Um, no.”

He reached for the nearest folder and flipped it open. After giving the list Draco had written out for him a read-through, he settled into marking the documents.

All in all, it was one of the longest afternoons Harry had spent at the Ministry. Even Draco wasn’t immune to it, though he spent the first few hours happily engrossed in his potions reference books. At precisely three, they took a short break for tea in the break room, during which Draco had nattered on about potions ingredients and all the different ways they could interact until Harry had threatened to brain him with the tea kettle, and then afterward Draco had joined him in marking the stacks of customer records. For a while Draco had gone on well enough with that, but as the afternoon slanted into evening, he’d begun rubbing at his eyes every few minutes and fidgeting in his seat.

And though Harry was certainly no stranger to long hours, by seven he'd had enough. He slammed his folder shut and threw his quill back into its holder.

“I think we’ve put in more than enough time on this for today.”

Draco waved a distracted hand without looking up. “See you tomorrow, then.”

Harry frowned at him. “Didn’t you hear me say we? As in, both of us? Come on, you’re obviously reaching your limit on this. We can pick it up again tomorrow.”

“I’m fine,” Draco muttered, ticking another mark onto the paper in front of him.

“Come on, at least take a dinner break. You haven't eaten since lunch.”

“I'll grab something on my way home.”

Harry glared at the top of Draco's bowed head. "And when will that be? You're not going to stay here until you finish. You'll be here all night."

Draco shrugged and finally looked up at Harry. "Of course not. I just want to get a little further and then I'll call it a night."

Harry didn't need the telltale flicker of Draco's eyes to spot the lie. He knew from experience that if he left Draco to it, he'd come back tomorrow morning to an empty desk and acres of guilt. He sighed. "Do you like Indian?"

"Do I like Indian *what*?" Draco grumbled and rubbed distractedly at his eyes. He bent his head back to the folders before him

Harry sighed again. "Nothing. Never mind. I'm going now."

"Right." Draco didn't look up.

Harry watched him for a moment, then pulled on a green hoodie over his tee-shirt and left. As the door snicked shut behind him, he thought he heard Draco mutter "Finite."

It was a testament to Draco's tiredness that he'd missed the fact that Harry had taken neither his Auror robes nor his work bag with him as he'd left. Not that Harry blamed him, really, because his own head was tingling and fuzzy after six uninterrupted hours of staring at lists of potions ingredients. Since Draco had spent their entire tea break blathering on about potions, Harry didn't really count it as a break at all. Just more work, only with tea.

Harry walked the few short blocks from the Ministry to his favorite restaurant for takeaway Indian. He ordered a spicy chicken curry for himself and, after some debate, a milder one for Draco. He added two portions of naan to his order and paid. The girl who rang him up quoted twenty minutes, and Harry spent them sitting outside, enjoying the chilly evening air and the luxury of not thinking of anything even remotely related to potions. Twenty minutes later, he went back in, collected his paper bag of food, and walked back to the Ministry.

He returned to his office, expecting to find Draco exactly as he left him. But as the door opened and Draco's head jerked up in surprise, he found that Draco was wearing a pair of gold wire glasses.

For a long minute they just stared at each other, and then with the wounded dignity of a cat that has had a bath forced upon it, Draco removed the glasses from his face, folded them carefully, set them down on his desk, and said, "This isn't what it looks like."

"Would you like to explain just how it isn't what it looks like? Because it looks an awful lot like you were wearing glasses," Harry said. He nudged the door shut with his foot and set the paper bag on his desk.

Draco's mouth worked open and shut twice before he said defensively, "They're just for reading."

Harry threw his hands up. “You’re unbelievable, you know that? Absolutely unbelievable. How many years have you been mocking me for needing glasses when it turns out that you need them too!” Fucking hell, it was the Muggle clothes all over again. Draco was *such* a bloody hypocrite that sometimes Harry wanted to hit him.

“I don’t mock you for needing them to see,” Draco shot back. He seemed to have recovered himself somewhat. “I mock you because you’ve been wearing the same hideous frames since you were eleven.”

Harry wanted to deny that, but he really couldn’t. The Dursleys had bought the round black plastic frames because they were the cheapest available. Harry had never bothered to change them whenever he got his prescription updated because by the time he could afford to, his face looked wrong without them. He shrugged a shoulder. “Well, they’re on my face so it’s not like I have to look at them.”

“Well I do,” Draco snapped. He whipped out his wand and advanced on Harry. “And they’re hideous and I’m sick of it.” He pointed his wand at Harry’s face.

Harry threw his hands out defensively. “What are you doing?”

The tip of Draco’s wand never wavered. “Fixing those ugly things.”

“I…” Harry watched Draco carefully, took in the determined glint in his eye and the firm set of his mouth, and figured this was one argument he wouldn’t win. It was a bit crazy, Draco wanting to fix Harry’s glasses. But then he’d just spent almost seven hours sorting through potions ingredients and that was bound to make anyone a little mental. “Just, if you need glasses to see up close, I’d appreciate you wearing them if you’re doing things to my face, please.”

He expected Draco to argue or at least sneer at him a little, but Draco just Summoned the glasses from his desk and pushed them onto his face before pointing his wand at Harry and muttering a spell. Harry’s glasses blurred and twisted. Draco frowned and did it again, and again, and again. Harry closed his eyes and let him get on with it.

A few minutes later, Draco quit muttering spells and said, “There.”

Harry opened his eyes. There seemed to be less to his glasses but he couldn’t tell anything beyond that. He picked up the framed photo from his desk and charmed it into a mirror. Draco had done away with the clunky black frames, replacing them with thin silver wire. Aside from that, they were identical in shape and size to the frames he’d always worn. Harry stared at his reflection. Unlike other times he’d tried new frames, his face didn’t look wrong. Just different. Good different, even.

“What do you think?” Draco asked softly.

He was standing much closer to Harry than Harry was really comfortable with for all sorts of reasons he really didn’t want to think about, mostly involving all of the wildly inappropriate ways he wanted to touch Draco and how hard it was getting to resist. He tried to move away,

but the backs of his thighs bumped the edge of his desk. “They’re great,” he managed. “But, er, they look sort of the same. Sort of.”

“You didn’t look like you in anything but round frames, I’m afraid,” Draco said. His voice was still gentle, and to Harry’s dismay he stepped even closer. “You’ve got decent bone structure, you know. You look better in thinner frames.” He reached up and brushed his fingertips lightly over Harry’s cheekbone.

The picture frame nearly slipped from Harry’s fingers and he forgot how to breathe for an instant. Draco was so close and his fingers were so warm, and really no one should be allowed to look that fetching in glasses but somehow Draco did. They gave him a scholarly, bookwormish sort of look that just begged to be debauched, especially since Harry knew that Draco was a virgin and no one had ever *debauched* him before. The thought of being the first one to touch Draco like that made Harry’s head swim and dear god he was really close to doing something exceedingly stupid. Like kissing Draco. Kissing him a lot. He looked really kissable in those glasses, and the way his head tipped down just a little as he regarded Harry —

“Indian!” Harry blurted out. He snatched up the paper bag and shoved it between himself and Draco.

Draco’s brow furrowed. “Indian?” But he stepped back and Harry could breathe again.

“I figured you weren’t going to go get dinner, so I brought dinner to you. I hope you like curry.”

Draco seemed to falter. “You brought me dinner?”

“Well, yeah,” he said, and for some reason – Draco’s closeness, the glasses-fixing, or maybe the way Harry’s cheek still tingled from the brush of his fingers – bringing Draco back something to eat suddenly felt a hell of a lot more intimate than the friendly gesture between coworkers that Harry had meant it as.

Harry turned away and unpacked the bag on his desk, thankful it gave him something to do. He set Draco’s curry on the corner of his desk and angled the sofa closer with a flick of his wand. He set the container of basmati rice and the packet of naan between them and took his own curry around to his side of the desk. Draco perched on the edge of the sofa and delicately pried the cardboard lid off his foil container. With another swish of his wand, Harry transfigured the round cardboard disk in Draco’s hand into a plate, then did the same to his own. Draco barely noticed; he was staring uncertainly into his curry.

“What?” Harry asked as he scooped rice onto his plate.

“It’s orange.”

“Well spotted,” Harry said cheerfully as he dumped half his container of chicken curry onto the rice. “Glad to see those glasses do more than just pretty up your face.” Clutter. He’d meant to toss Draco’s insult back at him and say ‘clutter up your face,’ damn it. Well, nothing

to be done for it now. He gave Draco a cheeky grin that he hoped made it look like he was just teasing.

Thankfully, Draco only glared as he took the glasses off and jammed them into a pocket of his waistcoat. “It’s orange,” he repeated. “Food shouldn’t be orange.”

Harry stirred his curry, mixing the rice into it. “What about oranges?”

Draco’s glare intensified. “Yes, well—“

“Or carrots?”

“Well that’s—“

“Or tangerines?”

“It looks like sick!” Draco snapped. “You brought me orange spew for dinner!”

Harry sighed and speared a chunk of chicken with his fork and used it to gesture at Draco. “To be fair, I also brought you rice and naan.”

Draco sent him another withering glare and poked at his curry with his fork. “Gloppy orange sick,” he muttered to himself.

“Will you just try it? Look, I’m eating the same thing. I wouldn’t have ordered it if I thought it was bad.” Harry watched as Draco frowned down at his dinner.

Draco sighed and stabbed a piece of chicken with his fork and took a cautious nibble. He chewed slowly, nose scrunched up as if in anticipation of not liking it. But his expression eased, and he swallowed and popped the rest of the piece into his mouth without comment.

“Well?” Harry asked.

“Rather good,” Draco said as if he’d never expected it to be anything else. “Pass me the rice, will you?”

Harry nudged the foil container of rice closer to Draco and they ate in silence for a while. Harry’s own plate lay mostly neglected as he spent most of his time caught up in watching the way Draco ate, how he held his fork almost daintily, how he alternated quick bites of chicken with neat forkfuls of rice, how the pink tip of his tongue darted out and licked a spot of sauce from his lips. Oh god, this had to stop.

“Hey Draco? What’s the B stand for?” Harry asked, desperate for a distraction.

Draco didn’t actually have to say, ‘What are you on about?’ because his eyebrows said it all for him. It worried Harry a little how good he was getting at interpreting Draco’s various facial expressions.

“On the nameplate, B’s your middle initial, isn’t it?”

“One of them,” Draco said around another bite of curry. He swallowed. “It stands for Black, of course.” His tongue darted out again to swipe away a stray smudge of sauce from the corner of his mouth.

“Draco Black Malfoy?” Harry said, helplessly watching Draco’s mouth. God, if he didn’t know better he’d swear that Draco was doing that on purpose.

“It’s Draco Lucius Abraxas Black Malfoy, actually, but they’d only let me pick one for my nameplate,” Draco said as he piled up another forkful of rice, then added, “The bastards,” almost as an afterthought.

“And that’s a pureblood thing, then, having half a dozen names?” Harry asked, thinking of Dumbledore.

Draco nodded. “It’s falling out of fashion, though.” He reached across the desk and snagged the last piece of naan. He paused with it in hand, staring at the tattered paperback sitting just to the side. “Is this that book you told me about? I thought you said it was in your—At your aunt and uncle’s house.”

Harry shrugged and shoveled another forkful of rice into his mouth. “It was. Obviously not anymore.”

Draco carefully set his piece of naan down on his plate. “So, you went back there?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I don’t want to talk about it.” He shoved another forkful into his mouth.

“It went that well, then.” Draco said dryly, not even bothering to form it into a question.

“I’m never going back again, if that’s what you’re asking,” Harry said. He dropped his fork onto his plate with a clatter. “I said I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Fine,” Draco said. He picked up his naan again and took a small, neat bite. He swallowed before saying, “Only, I understand how hard it is to live a life with bridges burned behind you. It’s harder still when you’ve set fire to them yourself.” He took another bite, swallowed again before he asked, “Can I borrow it?”

Harry blinked at him in surprise. “To read?”

He expected a sarcastic, drawled response to his admittedly stupid question, but instead Draco just said mildly, “That is generally what one does with books.”

“Why would you want to?”

Draco set the naan down on his plate again and regarded Harry with solemn grey eyes. “We’re supposed to be friends now, aren’t we? I think that reading it might help me understand you a bit better. That’s all.”

Dumbly, Harry nodded and watched as Draco picked up the book and leaned back on the sofa as he leafed through it, and the sight of him flicking through the familiar pages with those long, nimble fingers of his nearly undid Harry.

Draco Lucius Abraxas Black Malfoy, Harry thought, I'm really in trouble now, aren't I?

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Draco couldn't remember the last time he'd had such an incredibly tiring day. Even the long hours he'd put in the night before couldn't touch how long today had felt, though to be fair they might have added to it. In any case, he certainly wasn't complaining about last night. He'd been surprised but tremendously pleased that Harry had thought to bring him dinner, and of course spending more time around him wasn't such a bad thing either.

It'd been past midnight before they called it a night, and that had made getting up for this morning's early meeting that much tougher. Harry had walked in exactly three minutes late, and then had been all sunshine and smiles to find that Weasley had been pulled in on the Verve case as well.

Draco had been less pleased by that, because it meant that with Weasley came Smith, and Smith was such an enormous thorn in Draco's side that he'd been tempted to hex the stupid prat within the first five minutes. The stupid tosser fancied himself some sort of potions expert, which he absolutely *wasn't*, and disagreed vehemently with everything Draco said for no other discernable reason than the simple pleasure of driving Draco absolutely mad. When Draco suggested syrup of arnica as a viable ingredient, Smith argued that it was acromantula venom instead.

Draco had already considered and dismissed acromantula venom himself because, as with most rare ingredients, it was hellishly expensive. And what sort of idiot potion maker would even try to use it when syrup of arnica was a much cheaper, much more readily available alternative?

A simple analysis of the price of Verve confirmed his findings. If it contained acromantula venom, it'd have to sell for nearly twice what it did for the potion maker to turn a profit. He'd pointed all that out during his explanation of why Smith was dead wrong and a fucking idiot besides, but all that had gotten him was an 'Auror Malfoy, you are out of line!' and Merlin, if he only had a sickle for every time he'd heard *that*.

Even training back at the cabin that afternoon hadn't cheered him up much. Harry hadn't set off a single Concussive Curse despite the fact that Draco had laid down a full half dozen of them, and Draco had been hoping he would because he was dying to tell Harry just how much he'd enjoyed it at the meeting when he'd been told off and Smith sat there grinning smugly, and Harry had reached out beneath the table and given Draco's hand a supportive little squeeze. Smith's stupid face and sneering comments were much easier to ignore after that, with his fingertips still tingling from the warm pressure of Harry's hand.

And now he'd been going over potion ingredient lists for several hours and despite the fact that it was only half past four, he was more than ready to go home. He was just fantasizing

about knocking off a bit early for the first time in his career as an Auror when his Inbox pinged. He snatched the missive from it eagerly, glad of the distraction.

“What is it?” Harry asked, already rising from his seat.

Draco nudged his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “Domestic dispute. Neighbors heard shouting and spells going off. We’ve been assigned to go investigate.” He scanned over the missive again. “Huh.”

Harry froze near the door, one arm in his robes already. “What?”

Frowning, Draco read over it again. “This didn’t come through the usual channels. This was sent over directly by Patrolman Gayle. Usually MLEP sends this through General Communications and then either Auror Willard or Auror Clapford shunts it up to me.” His frown deepened. “And I never get anything urgent enough to warrant being pulled for it this late in the day.”

“Do you really care?” Harry asked as he jammed his other arm through a sleeve. The name Gayle sounded vaguely familiar to him, but he couldn’t place where they’d met. “It’ll get us out of this bloody office.”

Draco couldn’t much argue with that, so he quickly donned his own Auror robe and they left the Ministry, following the coordinates stated on the missive to a quaint little cottage in a quiet little neighborhood.

They strode up the brick path to the front door, and Harry was just raising his fist to knock when something deep inside the house exploded and someone screamed. They made eye contact and Draco nodded. He hit the lock with an Alohomora just before Harry kicked the door open, and they went in together, Harry low and Draco high, both with wands drawn and ready.

Draco marveled for a moment how well they moved together just before they hit the trap laid on the floor. It was harmless, a simple Sticking Charm that only glued their feet to the floor, but when they both lowered their wands to disarm it, someone hit them both with an Expelliarmus. Draco’s wand wrenched itself from his hand, and he looked up just in time to see the shadowy figure that had appeared at the far end of the room raise his own wand at the ceiling and shout, “Reducto!”

Draco raised his hand high, knowing that he didn’t have nearly enough power to protect himself without a wand but before he could cast, Harry grabbed him and held him close as he screamed, “PROTEGO!”

The whole ceiling caved in, chunks of plaster and planks of wood and an entire bedroom set of heavy wooden furniture tumbled down, splintering and smashing around them, clearly visible through the rippling bubble of Harry’s Shield Charm. Harry dropped it as the dust settled and he slowly released Draco.

“Are you all right?”

In truth, Draco's heart was racing and his stomach felt jittery and sick as he looked at the wreckage around them, and ridiculously the only thing that he could think was not that he'd just nearly died, but, 'So that's what it feels like to be held in Harry Potter's arms.' He shook his head.

"I think I'm still a bit in shock, to be honest."

Harry looked around the room. "I guess he's probably gotten away by now." He tried to take a step and nearly fell over when his foot refused to move, and Draco's stomach turned over at the thought of what might have happened if they'd been standing a little farther apart when they set off the Sticking Charm trap. Harry reached out a hand. "Accio wands!"

The culprit evidently hadn't bothered to grab their wands after disarming them because they flew across the room and Harry caught them neatly. He handed Draco's wand over and they both Unstuck themselves.

Draco sighed. "I guess we should check to make sure he really did leave, though I can't imagine he wouldn't."

Sure enough, a quick search of the premises revealed no one. Back out on the front walk, Harry cast a standard Active Crimescene Ward around the property and they Apparated back to the Ministry.

Back in their office, Draco sighed again. "The paperwork on this is going to be a nightmare."

"About that," Harry said, rubbing a hand over the nape of his neck. "I'd, uh, appreciate if you'd leave out the specifics."

Draco glanced over at him. "What, the wandless bit?"

"Yeah. I mean, I get so much attention as it is, I don't need any more."

Draco snorted. "Wandless magic isn't unheard of, Potter," he said. "I hate to disappoint you, but what you did wasn't even all that impressive. Not that I don't appreciate you saving my life, of course. But it's just power."

Harry frowned at him. "Just power?" he repeated. "Look, not to brag or anything, but it's my understanding that casting wandlessly is pretty impressive."

"It'll take more than that to impress me. You're all power with no control," he said, and when Harry just blinked dumbly at him, Draco rolled his eyes. "Look at it like this. Imagine that your magic is a locked door. Your wand acts as the key to opening it. If you don't have the key – you're working wandlessly – there are still two ways to get through the door. Either you slip through the keyhole – control. Or you blast the door right off its fucking hinges – power."

Harry blinked again. "Wait, so you're saying people can do wandless magic just by being good at casting?"

“More or less,” Draco said with a little shrug. “It’s a bit more complicated than that. Being good at magic doesn’t necessarily mean that one has the control needed to perform wandlessly.”

“I’ve never heard of it working like that,” Harry said skeptically.

“I’d wager there are a good number of things you haven’t heard of. It doesn’t make it any less true,” Draco said.

“But it doesn’t make sense at all,” Harry insisted. “Obviously control is important, but I just don’t see how it’s any match for power, when it comes down to it.”

“Fine. Here.” Draco tossed his wand to Harry, who seemed to catch it mostly on surprised instinct.

“What are you doing?”

“Proving my point.” Draco extended one hand toward his desk. He took a moment to center himself, then flicked his fingers in an sharp little twisting motion and said, “Incendio!”

There was a spark and a small curl of smoke from the sheet of blank parchment lying on his blotter. Harry blinked at it, then glanced at Draco.

“That’s, um.” He looked like he thought he should probably say something complimentary but couldn’t figure out what.

Draco raised his eyebrows, waiting.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Sorry, but you made a spark. Am I supposed to be impressed?”

“Why don’t you go take a look at it and then tell me?” Draco suggested and couldn’t keep the smug smile off his face.

It had taken him months to perfect this, and though it boiled down to little more than a parlor trick, he had no doubt that it would impress. He was gratified to see Harry’s mouth drop open as he rounded Draco’s desk. He picked up the parchment and brushed one hesitant hand over the center of it, where Draco’s neat signature was scorched onto the paper. Draco was pleased to see that the singes didn’t even go through to the other side. That happened, sometimes.

“Oh my god,” Harry managed at last. “This is… This has to be some sort of trick. No one can do this. You shouldn’t be able to do this.”

Draco shrugged. “You’ve got my wand. Tell me what to write on there and I’ll do it.”

“My name?”

Of course, how original. Draco extended his hand, focused, and cast again. Another spark and curl of smoke, and the words ‘Potter Stinks’ appeared just below his signature. The final S burned through the parchment this time, but Draco was still satisfied. This level of precision

took a lot out of him, and doing it back-to-back like this wasn't something he'd practiced too often.

"Oh my god," Harry said again.

"There. Now tell me that power is everything. If you tried to do that, you'd set your whole desk on fire," Draco sniffed. "And now if you'll excuse me, I have somewhere to be. I trust you can manage to file the appropriate papers regarding today's incident."

He Summoned his wand from Harry's slack hand and swept out of their office without a backward glance. He stalked down to the Atrium and had to talk himself into stepping through the Floo. Merlin, he wasn't looking forward to this, not one bit, but it'd just be that much worse if he waited until Sunday.

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Harry looked at the parchment for a long time after Draco left the room. He hadn't even considered this sort of precise magical control was even possible, yet here was the proof. Harry had always thought that wandless magic was inherently a reckless, volatile thing. When he cast wandlessly, it was like flipping a lightswitch. On or off, all or nothing. But then, he'd never really tried to control it. He only used wandless magic in emergencies, like today, when regulating the strength of his spells wasn't necessarily important.

He dropped the singed parchment back on Draco's desk and sighed. It was still a few minutes until his shift ended, and Harry thought he should probably go tell Kingsley about their near miss in person. Harry gathered up the file that had come through with the information about the house, and stepped out into the hall.

He found Kingsley in his office.

"I was just nearly killed," he said. No sense in beating around the bush, he thought.

Kingsley's dark eyes snapped to his. "And Auror Malfoy?"

Harry shook his head. "He was nearly killed right alongside me." He gave Kingsley a quick overview of what had happened, then passed him the file. "I was going to go down to MLEP next, try to talk to the Patrolman who reported it and see if there's any more information about who called it in."

But Kingsley was frowning down at the file. "You're sure this is the report you were just sent?" he asked.

"Er, yes?" Harry said, thrown by the sudden question. He frowned. "Why?"

"Because I make it a point to familiarize myself with every man and woman who works for the DMLE," Kingsley said. "And there's no one here named Armin Gayle."

Armin Gayle.

It suddenly clicked where Harry knew that name from. “Oh my god,” he said. “Hold on, just a second,” he called as he dashed to the door, ignoring Kingsley calling after him. “I’ll be right back!”

Harry ran back to his office and rifled through his drawers before he found what he was looking for. He flipped through the files on his way back to the Head Auror’s office. First file, Malfoy’s first dead partner. Suspicious spellwork in an abandoned house. Reporting Patrolman: Felicity Metcalfe. Second file, second dead partner. Stolen painting. Reporting Patrolman: *Armin Gayle*. Third file, third dead partner. Death Eater safe house. Reporting Patrolman: Felicity Metcalfe.

This just couldn’t be a coincidence. Two for Gayle, two for Metcalfe. Gayle didn’t work here, and Harry would have bet everything in his vaults down to the last dented Knut that Metcalfe didn’t either.

“Felicity Metcalfe!” Harry said as he burst back into Kingsley’s office.

Kingsley stared at him as if he’d gone off his nut. “Who?”

Harry slapped the files down on Kingsley’s desk. “She doesn’t exist either.” He stabbed a finger at her name. “But she reported a Death Eater safe house and suspicious spellwork. Gayle doesn’t exist, but he reported a stolen painting and a domestic dispute. Sir, you see what this means. Malfoy’s not guilty. Someone’s killing off his partners and trying to frame him for it.”

****

With perfect timing, Draco entered the Manor’s dining room just as his parents were sitting down. Lucius barely paused to flick an indifferent glance his way, but Narcissa lit up with such a smile that Draco felt a little flare of guilt and hastily promised himself that he’d try to visit her more often than just the usual two hours on Sunday afternoons.

“Hello, Father. Mum,” he murmured, leaning down to press a brief kiss to her cheek as he passed her seat on the way to his.

“Draco, what a pleasant surprise to have you here,” she said. “The house elves have prepared salmon for us tonight, but I’m sure they can make something else if you’d prefer.”

“No, that’s fine. I’m not all that hungry, actually.” In truth he still felt a little queasy from his near-brush with death. Three times in two weeks, Merlin. That had to be some sort of record. “I’m actually just here because…” The words dried up in his throat as both of his parents watched him expectantly. Oh hell, nothing to be done for it then. Best just get it out there.

Draco swallowed hard and said, “I was almost killed at work today. About twenty minutes ago, in fact.”

Narcissa inhaled sharply and dropped her fork. Lucius froze for an instant, then his finger curled around the arms of his chair and he leaned forward intently.

“What happened?” he demanded.

Draco couldn’t meet his father’s steely gaze, couldn’t bear to see the way Narcissa’s eyes glimmered with simultaneous fear and relief. So he kept his own eyes pinned to the table in front of him as he recounted the afternoon’s events, omitting the Expelliarmus and Harry’s wandless rescue.

As he finished, a house elf crept up to refill Lucius’ water glass, and Lucius swatted it away hard.

“It’s so difficult to find good help these days.” He sneered down at the house elf as it backed away, tearful and groveling.

Draco frowned. True, they’d had to replace most of their house elves after the war – Death Eaters used them for practice when there were no Muggles around to torture – but Draco thought this new batch had been doing fine.

“Oh, darling,” Narcissa said. “I know how much your career means to you. But surely there are other positions in the Ministry you could pursue? Surely there’s something else that wouldn’t involve this much danger?”

Draco swallowed back a sigh as he felt the first faint pangs of a headache blossom behind his right eyebrow. “Mum, we’ve been over this…”

“And all that’s involved is a lot of hand-waving and you promising to be careful. But this keeps *happening*. Draco, I worry about you.”

“He’s more than capable of taking care of himself,” Lucius interrupted and for the first time Draco was glad of it. That feeling quickly vanished when Lucius turned to him and continued, “And that’s why it’s high time you took your rightful place and learned to run this estate.”

Well, he’d known this was going to be a long evening. Draco exhaled slowly and thought fondly of his cozy office and stacks of paperwork.

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The next morning, Harry walked into his office to find, as usual, Draco already settled at his desk with a towering stack of files at his elbow and a jumble of papers spread over the desktop before him. He was wearing a pale green shirt today with a jade green waistcoat over

it and an ivory tie. It was a good color on him, though still not as nice as blue. He was wearing his glasses again, and Harry was struck anew by just how much the oval frames fit in with his prissy garb and, yes, also how well they suited his narrow face.

“You tried it when you went home, didn’t you?” Draco said without looking up from his papers.

Still caught up in studying Draco, Harry jumped a little. “What?”

Draco looked up, peering at him over the rim of his glasses in a way that Harry found he liked entirely too much. “The wandless Incendio. You tried it when you went home. Right?”

Harry had indeed tried it. He’d been frustrated when he went home yesterday, following a long and drawn-out argument with Kingsley about continuing the investigation on Draco. Though Kingsley had agreed that at this point, someone framing Draco appeared to be the most likely conclusion, he’d insisted that Harry continue his investigation. Harry, surprised, had asked why, and Kingsley had told him that either Harry was expected to find proof of Draco’s innocence, or he was to keep building a case against him in the event that Draco was the one behind it all and only making it look like someone was trying to frame him.

Seething and aggravated that he hadn’t been able to make Kingsley agree to let him quit investigating Draco and frustrated because it wasn’t at all like Kingsley to ignore evidence when it stared him in the face, practicing the wandless Incendio had seemed like a perfect distraction. He hadn’t expected to master it on his first try, but he honestly hadn’t thought it’d be that difficult either, because, really, if Draco could do it, then he certainly could. As a precaution he’d laid the sheet of parchment in the bottom of his bathtub.

A precaution for which he was immensely grateful when his first attempt had set his shower curtain aflame in a roaring whoosh of fire. Along with his bath mat, towels, and half the cabinets. His bottles of shampoo and conditioner had melted into charred plastic lumps that even a strong Scourgify hadn’t been able to scrape off the ledge of his bathtub. The parchment, needless to say, did not survive.

“Erm, yeah,” he said, shucking off his outer robes. “It didn’t go as well as I’d hoped it would.”

Draco took off his glasses and tucked them away into his pocket. “Did you burn down your flat?”

Harry scowled at him. “No.” Just… part of his bathroom. And a little of the bedroom carpet, on his third try. He’d given up at that point, ultimately convinced by the wailing of his smoke detectors.

“Then you’ve exceeded my expectations.” Draco stood and rolled his eyes. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. It’s not a slur on your magical abilities. We all have our strengths and weaknesses, and magic is no exception. You’ve always gotten by on sheer strength, just as I’ve played to my strength of impeccable control. The difference between us is I can’t learn strength. You, on the other hand, are perfectly capable of learning to control your abilities better.”

“And you’re going to teach me, I suppose?” Harry hoped there wouldn’t be Concussive Curses involved.

“Of course. In fact, this rather ties into our other training. Disarming dark spells can require a very high degree of precision that frankly you’re just not capable of at this point. So we’ll take a few days to work on that exclusively before we go to the cabin again.”

Harry rubbed at an itchy spot behind his ear. “Makes sense, I guess. What do I need to do?”

Draco gestured at Harry’s desk. “I’ve already set it up for you.”

On his blotter sat ten marbles, nine white and one red, and Harry was well acquainted with the familiar shimmering bubble of a Protego Totalus from watching Hermione cast it around their tent every night during their involuntary extended camping trip.

“What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Lift the red one,” Draco said. He slid his wand into a pocket and stretched a hand over the marbles. “Just like this.” His forehead creased in concentration, and he levitated the red marble just a few inches over the desk with a crisply enunciated Wingardium Leviosa. The white marbles didn’t even wobble. “Go on, you try.”

Frowning, Harry stepped up to his desk. He reached one hand over the marbles as Draco had done, and cast. Instantly the marbles shot up in all directions, clattering together as they ricocheted off the Protego Draco had placed over them. The desk itself shuddered but didn’t fling itself at the ceiling, and Harry couldn’t help but feel sort of proud about that.

“Well, I guess it could have been worse. At least I didn’t lift the desk,” he sighed.

“That’s because I used a Sticking Charm on it. On everything on your side of the room, actually,” Draco said. “I thought it best to take precautions.”

He went back to his side of the office and settled back in at his own desk, leaving Harry with the marbles. Harry sat in his chair and cast again, and again the marbles clattered violently against each other and the Protego. Harry waited until they rolled to a stop and tried again, concentrating hard on the red one. Same result. He sighed and reached out again.

“This is pointless,” Harry complained some time later as he threw himself back in his chair. He’d been at this for ages and all he’d succeeded in doing was making the desk shudder more and more violently as his frustration mounted. “I don’t see the point of all this. I’ve gotten along just fine so far without this sort of *control*.”

At his own desk, Draco continued to sort through a stack of ingredient lists for the Verve case. The stack looked suspiciously bigger than it had yesterday. “Just because you actually need to work at something for once in your life doesn’t mean it’s not worth mastering,” he said without looking up.

“I’ve worked at things before,” Harry muttered, thinking of Patronus Charms and Occlumency and the hunt for Horcruxes, and even that very first Wingardium Leviosa hadn’t

clicked straight off.

But thinking on it, all that was years ago. In fact, Harry realized with a start, he hadn't had to work this hard to master anything since the war. After becoming an Auror he'd just sort of coasted, magically speaking. Sure he'd learned new spells here and there, but for the most part he'd been told constantly, from friends and colleagues and the papers and the whole bloody world, that Harry Potter was the best there was. And after a time he'd come to believe it, that what he could do was all that could be done. Everyone said so, didn't they?

He'd stopped pushing himself.

And now here was Draco Malfoy, telling him that he still had room to grow. That he still had new goals to meet and higher levels to strive for, that he could be more than he already was. Draco had thrown down a challenge, and just like that, Harry had something more to reach for.

With renewed determination, Harry leaned forward and stretched out his hand.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

The marbles flung themselves against the Protego Totalus with a rattle, and the floor groaned as his desk attempted to wrench free. Harry sighed.

Across the room, Draco smiled to himself.

****

Two hours into pub night, both Harry and Draco had yet to buy themselves a single drink. Draco had lost count of how many he'd had, but he'd reached that perfect level of just drunk enough, all warm and loose and happy, approaching dizzy but not quite there yet. Now Harry had wandered off to go talk to some other colleagues and Weasley had followed along after, leaving Draco sitting at the table with Granger and a small tower of empty shot glasses.

Draco hadn't been looking forward to coming out tonight once Harry had mentioned that Granger would be here. Other than quick glimpses of her during the Battle of Hogwarts, the last time he'd spent any length of time in her company had been at the Manor, and she'd been writhing on the floor in agony as Bellatrix cackled madly and cast Crucio after Crucio, while Draco had stood by powerless to do anything but watch. Draco had tried to back out of coming to the pub tonight, once he heard Granger would be here. He claimed a long week and a headache, and Harry had looked at him with those big green eyes of his and said in a quietly disappointed voice how much he'd been looking forward to Draco coming out with them. Draco had caved at the last minute as they were leaving the office. He'd said he was feeling better, and Harry had given him such a broad, beaming smile that Draco still couldn't quite regret his decision.

Not even now, sitting alone with Granger as they both sipped ale and tried to pretend the silence wasn't awkward. Draco was on the verge of bringing up the weather when it struck him how absurd this was. They were both adults, weren't they? And yes, they'd been through some pretty horrible shit, but so had he and Harry and *they'd* managed to come to something resembling peace, hadn't they?

"Look, we need to get it all over with at once," Draco said when the uncomfortable silence became unbearable. "You and I have a lot of bad history between us, and I think that we ought to just get it all out there now so we can get past it."

"Like ripping off a bandage," Granger said with a nod of agreement.

Draco didn't see what her Healer training had to do with this conversation, but he let it slide and said, "I thought you were an insufferable know-it-all bossy bitch. I thought Weasley was oafish lackey trailing along in Harry's shadow with no merits of his own, and Harry. Well, I thought so much about Harry that I can't even list all of it."

Granger stared at him as if he'd gone mad. "You call this getting past it?"

"*My point* is I was wrong about Harry and I was wrong about Weasley, and I'm fairly certain that I was wrong about you too. Well, not that you know everything because I rather suspect you do. But the rest. I like Harry, and Harry likes you, so I'm willing to bet that we could get on quite well if we'd give it half a chance."

For a long moment Granger just stared at him. Then she took a small sip of her ale and set the glass aside and folded her hands primly on the tabletop in front of her. "I thought you were a nasty, obnoxious, pretentious, conceited, snotty little inbred brat." She arched a single eyebrow with a precision that made Draco a little jealous as she added, "You still are, as far as I can tell."

That stung somewhat more than Draco was comfortable admitting. He sniffed once and reminded himself how well a bit of self-deprecation had gone over with Weasley. "I'll give you inbred; like most purebloods, my family tree resembles a spider's web more than anything. But I like to think I've moved beyond the rest," he said stiffly. "Most of the appalling shit I said back then was just repeating what I'd heard my father say, anyhow."

Granger's mouth tightened into a disapproving line. "Excuses, excuses, Malfoy. Why am I not surprised."

"I'm not *trying* to make excuses, I'm trying to give you a reason," Draco said, leaning forward across the table and lowering his voice. This was embarrassing enough to say to Granger; he certainly didn't need anyone else overhearing. "I said and did some pretty horrid things, and yes, I was a fairly awful person back then. And I'm sorry it took me so long to realize. But he was my father. I practically worshipped the ground he walked on, so of course I believed every word he said."

"Worshipped? Believed?" she repeated and that eyebrow arched again. "Past tense?"

Draco nodded, grateful she'd caught what he was trying to say. "Now I know better."

Granger regarded him evenly for a long minute. “Ron seems to think you’ve changed. And Harry genuinely seems to like you.”

Draco held his breath as she paused and took a sip of ale.

Granger continued to stare at him. “My opinion of you hasn’t changed since Hogwarts, but then I haven’t seen you since Hogwarts either. I’m willing to give you the chance to change my mind.”

“That’s all I ask,” he said.

And see, he really had changed. The Hogwarts-era Draco would have lashed out at her for even daring to insinuate that he should be grateful for the chance she was willing to give him, but right now all he felt was relief. He knew how important it was to Harry that Draco get along with his friends. It hadn’t taken much to win over Weasley, and though he thought it might be a little harder to gain Granger’s approval (a Malfoy needing the approval of a Mudblood? Lucius would fly into a rage the likes of which Draco hadn’t seen since the Edgar Allan Poe incident.) Draco felt that he could do it. It all boiled down to the same approach he’d taken with Harry and Weasley: don’t be an ass. Granger might take a little longer to convince, but ultimately she’d get there. He’d make sure of it.

“So,” Granger said briskly. “I noticed that Harry’s wearing new glasses. He said you did that?”

Draco glanced at her and nodded. “I did,” he admitted and couldn’t resist pulling a face. “His old ones were hideous.”

To his surprise, Granger nodded too. “I’ve been trying to talk him into new ones for years. I’m surprised he let you change them.”

Draco gave an embarrassed little cough. “I didn’t give him much of a choice, I’m afraid. If I’m being completely honest, I practically cornered him.”

“Well it’s definitely an improvement, no matter how you went about it,” Granger said.

Draco shrugged. “He’s not a bad looking bloke. Good bone structure. He shouldn’t hide it behind thick ugly frames.”

“I see,” Granger said slowly. “And that’s why you did it? To make him more attractive?”

“Might as well since I have to stare at him all day,” Draco said and immediately bit his tongue. He could get away with half-veiled statements and insinuations around Harry because he got delightfully flustered when Draco did it, but never seemed to take them seriously. But Draco had a feeling Granger was far more shrewd. He needed to watch his mouth around her.

“I see,” Granger said again.

Draco cast out for some safe topic to turn the conversation toward, but just then Harry returned, still talking to Weasley. They both settled down at the table and Draco and Granger

let their conversation lapse into silence as Harry and Weasley launched into a heated discussion about the Canon's chances in their next match. Weasley was, as usual, completely deluded.

"Hey Granger," Draco said with a sly grin after he'd worked his way through most of his pint.

By that point, Weasley was gesturing a lot with his pint glass and trying to talk over Harry, who just kept repeating loudly, "A bumblebee, Ron, a bumblebee!"

"Yes?" Granger asked.

Draco glanced over at where Weasley and Harry were still arguing. "I assume Harry's told you about the training sessions we've been doing?"

She frowned, mildly disapproving. "In great detail."

"Wonderful. Watch this, then. I've got him trained."

He coughed loudly and Harry glanced over at him.

Draco put his fingers in his ears.

Harry reacted instantly and without stopping to think. He flinched back, hands flying up to cover his own ears. He nearly knocked over his pint glass onto Weasley's lap.

Draco laughed uproariously, and even Hermione cracked a smile as Harry glared and flicked a bottle cap at Draco's forehead. Draco's hand darted up to snatch it out of the air but his coordination was off from all the drinks he'd had. The bottle cap bounced off his fingertips and went skittering into the corner. While Granger was laughing, Draco cast a discreet Accio. He didn't botch this catch, and slipped the bottle cap safely into his pocket.

"You're an ass," Harry told him. He shot Granger a wounded look. "And you, laughing. You're supposed to be my friend."

Draco only grinned. "Oh, don't blame her. It's not her fault you're unintentionally funny."

"Has anyone ever told you what a brat you are?" Harry asked, and Draco could see him struggle to keep his mouth from twitching up into a smile.

"Oh, all the time," Draco said easily, stretching one arm over the back of Granger's chair, and was gratified to see Weasley's expression grow dark. "In fact, Granger just did not ten minutes ago."

Granger had the good grace to look somewhat embarrassed, even as she used her elbow to nudge his arm off her chair.

Harry only rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, not much gets by Hermione," he said and then turned pointedly away to continue his conversation with Weasley.

“You know,” Granger said a moment later. “I never thought I'd see you two getting along. I know you have been, according to Harry, but I don’t think I really believed it until now.”

Draco never thought he’d be sitting in an Auror pub, drinking with the famous Golden Trio either. He shrugged. “Odd how things work out sometimes.”

The rest of the evening passed in a lovely haze of alcohol and conversation and laughter. Surprisingly, Draco spent most of it talking to Granger, mostly about Harry and Weasley, and by the end – possibly helped along by alcohol – they’d begun to relax with each other. Shortly after midnight, Harry tapped him on the shoulder.

“I’m heading out now,” he said. He’d already pulled another of those ridiculous pocket shirts with the little hood on over his tee-shirt.

“Oh,” Draco said, standing. “I’m about ready to call it a night. Mind if I walk with you?”

“Not at all,” Harry said, and beamed in a way that set Draco’s heart stuttering. He leaned over the table and said, “Night, Hermione.”

“Goodnight, Harry,” she said. “Goodnight, Malfoy.”

Draco nodded at her. “Granger,” he said and offered his hand.

She took it without hesitation, then used it to draw him closer. “I haven’t changed my mind yet, but I think I’m getting there,” she said quietly and released him.

Straightening, Draco nodded. “I’m glad to hear,” he said, then waved at Weasley and followed Harry out of the pub and into the night.

If they made a habit of this, Draco thought that this right here would quickly become his favorite part of the week. Outside with nothing but the empty street and dark sky around them, Draco could imagine that they were the only two people in London. They walked slowly down the sidewalk, not speaking, but unlike the silence in the pub with Granger, the silence he shared with Harry felt warm and easy.

Draco hadn’t had nearly as much to drink as he had the previous week and blessedly the urge to snog Harry up against a lamppost hadn’t resurfaced. Well, at least not with the same intensity as last week. Or maybe he was just building up a tolerance of sorts to the urge to snog Harry.

“She wanted me to fix her plate,” Harry said out of nowhere after they’d walked a block and a half.

Draco looked over at him, surprised. The tension in Harry’s voice matched the hard set of his jaw. “I’m sorry, I don’t follow,” he said carefully.

The sole of Harry’s trainer scuffed on the pavement as he kicked at a pebble. “My aunt. She’s got this plate that she wants to give to my cousin. He’s getting married, you know. Only she’d broken it.”

Draco held his tongue. Suddenly he felt like he was back in that small hot room with Harry as he opened up that flawless Boy-Who-Lived façade and exposed yet another weakness, and Draco was afraid that if he said anything the moment would shatter. He hadn't known just how much he'd missed that stunning intimacy until now.

After a few moments, Harry sighed. "She said she was glad I came. And for just a moment, I thought she meant that she was happy to see me. But she really only meant that she was glad because I could fix her stupid plate." He scuffed his shoe on the pavement again even though there was no pebble this time. "I feel so stupid about it. I should've known better."

Draco wanted to reach out and lay a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder. But if he touched him he wasn't sure if he could stop with that, and this really wasn't an appropriate conversation for lamppost snogging. "Harry," he said softly.

"She hates me, she still hates me and she hates that I can do magic. Except when it's convenient for her. Except when it's *useful* to her to set it aside because she needs something from me. And now Dudley's going to have everything, a wife and a family and a stupid heirloom plate, and that plate's just as much mine as it is his. It was my great-grandmother's too, wasn't it?" He paused and scrubbed a hand across his face, pushing his glasses halfway up his forehead. "I don't even care about the plate, not really. But I don't have anything like it. Not, oh, this is my grandmother's china, or that was my grandfather's pocket watch. It's like I haven't got a family at all. I guess I really don't. I should be used to it by now, but there you have it."

Harry trailed off and resettled his glasses on his nose, and Draco still held his tongue. He could sense from the rigid set of Harry's shoulders that he didn't want sympathy and that kind words would only be salt in an open wound. Right now all he wanted was to be heard, and Draco was more than willing to listen if that's what he needed.

Half a block later, Harry continued. "The book was still in my cupboard, and I tried…" He trailed off and it was a full minute before he went on. "I couldn't make myself go inside." He swallowed and kept his eyes pinned to the pavement in front of him. "After everything I've been through, I still couldn't make myself go inside."

Draco couldn't keep silent any longer. Kind words were one thing, but sometimes Harry needed the verbal equivalent of a slap upside the head. He grabbed Harry by the elbow and jerked him to a stop. "Given everything you've been through," he said sharply, "you've grown into an remarkably well-adjusted adult. Frankly, after all the shit you've been through, by rights you ought to be locked away in St. Mungo's in a padded room all your own and no sharp objects."

Harry gaped at him for a moment, then said, "After all the shit you've been through, you'd be in the room next to me. Except they wouldn't let you have any matches." He finally looked up at Draco and a faint smile played over his mouth. "All things considered, we really are doing all right, aren't we?" Despite the smile on his face, there was something unsteady in his eyes that just begged for reassurance.

"We absolutely are," Draco said. Harry nodded and gently tugged his elbow free of Draco's grasp as they started walking again, and Draco let another half a block pass by in silence

before he asked, “Why did you go back? I know for the book, but you could have gone over there for it when they weren’t home. You didn’t have to actually see her.”

Harry went silent for so long that Draco thought he might not answer. “It’s your fault, actually.”

Draco frowned. “My fault?”

“Yeah,” Harry said and nudged him lightly with his elbow. “You were an awful person at Hogwarts, and now you’re someone I rather like. I just thought if you could change this much, then maybe they could too.”

“It wasn’t easy,” Draco admitted. “It’s been a lot of biting my tongue and swallowing my pride. But it’s been worth it.”

It was, too. Because everything he’d done had brought him here, to this moment, to walking down this quiet dark street with Harry Potter. And Draco wouldn’t trade this for anything.

They reached their corner and both came to a stop.

“Well,” said Harry. “I’m just there.” He gestured up the street.

“I remember,” Draco said. He edged a bit closer and took great pleasure in the way that Harry’s eyes widened. “I suppose this is goodnight, then.”

“Yes, right,” Harry said in an almost-whisper. His eyes flickered down to Draco’s mouth. “So. Goodnight, Draco.”

Draco had no intention of actually kissing Harry. He’d only meant to continue the flirting he’d already been doing all week, but right now with Harry’s eyes pinned to his mouth it was so hard to resist. Harry wanted this, and Draco wanted this, and it would be so easy to lean forward just a little and close the small distance between them. Why shouldn’t it happen?

Because in some ways Draco was still the same boy he’d been back at Hogwarts; because sometimes he was still such a coward.

“Goodnight, Harry,” Draco said and eased back.

The moment broke, and Harry turned and fled back up the sidewalk. Indulging in a little sigh, Draco turned away and started for his own home, glancing back over his shoulder every few steps until he caught Harry looking back too.

Parting from Harry still felt like the end of a date, but this time Draco embraced it. He’d just take a little more time, that’s all. Just to figure out if Harry was really serious about all this. It was daunting enough to take the risk of offering himself to Harry. He needed to be sure that Harry wanted him seriously enough to take the risk of a relationship. Draco was only willing to jump if he knew that Harry would meet him halfway.

Draco slipped his hand into his pocket and closed his fist around the bottle cap, running the pad of his thumb over the ridged edge. It was foolish and sentimental and utterly unlike him,

but Draco thought that he'd keep it as a reminder of the night he decided he was serious about Harry Potter.

Chapter 8

They were at Mrs. Dodson's again, this time in search of a small leatherbound journal with a fleur-de-lis stamped into the cover. They'd been there for nearly an hour with no sign of it. Harry was currently digging through a bookshelf whose shelves sagged beneath the weight of row upon row of books, but Draco didn't think the journal would be somewhere so obvious. He'd found a bureau on the other side of the shop and already worked his way through the top two drawers. He'd just opened the middle one as Mrs. Dodson made her way across the shop toward him.

Because it was nearly three o'clock Draco assumed she was going to ask him what sort of biscuits he'd like with his tea, but instead she said, "He fancies you, you know."

Draco started and looked down at her, and she nodded in Harry's direction. Draco coughed, once. "I'm afraid it would be entirely inappropriate for me to comment on that."

Mrs. Dodson harrumphed. "I see how he watches you when your back is turned."

Draco very much wanted to know but really didn't want to ask. He made it about ten seconds before he caved and said as casually as he could, "Oh? And how is that?"

Mrs. Dodson chuckled. "Well I'd tell you, but it'd be inappropriate for me to comment, wouldn't it?"

"Not for you. You're not an Auror," Draco pointed out as he sorted through a drawer of monogrammed handkerchiefs. "There's a whole section of the Auror's handbook that details exactly how it would be inappropriate for me, but you're fine." He wondered exactly how many rules he'd be breaking by starting up a relationship with Harry. He made a mental note to look it up later.

"Hm. Well." She didn't say anything else.

Draco finished with the drawer and slid it shut. He pulled open the next one and found it brimming with mismatched napkin rings. "So? How does he look at me when my back is turned?"

Mrs. Dodson smiled at him and leaned a little closer. "Sometimes he looks at you like you're the last cup of water in the middle of the desert," she said, then straightened and gave a little shrug. "Of course, sometimes he just stares at your bum."

Draco felt his cheeks warm at that. He'd already been sure that Harry fancied him, because Harry was possibly the least-subtle person on the planet. It'd been three weeks since that first pub night, three weeks during which he'd flirted constantly with Harry, giving him little compliments and finding every excuse to touch him. Just that morning he'd picked an imaginary bit of fluff from Harry's hair, carding his fingers quickly through the strands while Harry stood frozen in place, blushing a little and looking everywhere but at Draco. Draco's

fingertips itched at the memory of those thick, glossy locks sliding through his fingers and it had been something of a struggle to keep from carding his hand through it a second time.

“Have you told him yet?” Mrs. Dodson asked, breaking him away from his musings.

Draco thought about pretending he didn’t know what she meant. Instead he just slid the drawer of napkin rings shut and said, “No.”

“Well? When are you going to tell him?” She tapped her cane impatiently on the floor, as if she thought he should go do it right this minute. And for a minute, Draco was sorely tempted, but the lure of lamppost snogging was just too great.

“Friday,” Draco said impulsively as the loose beginnings of a plan took shape. “I’m going to tell him on Friday.” He looked over to where Harry was still sifting through books and his stomach twisted in nervous anticipation. Friday was four days from now, and it felt both too soon and too far away at the same time. He slipped his hand into his pocket and rubbed his thumb over the bottle cap he’d taken to carrying around with him.

Mrs. Dodson nodded and reached up to pat his cheek. “It’ll be fine, dear. You’ll have to tell me all about it when you visit next week.”

Draco couldn’t help but smile. “Have the thieves set an appointment this time?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she scoffed and swatted lightly at his ankle with her cane. “Now, what kind of biscuits would you like with your tea?”

Fifteen minutes later, Harry let out a triumphant shout from the back of the shop. Draco stood up from the wicker basket of doll clothes he’d been hunched over and a small flare of disappointment went through him when he saw Harry holding a small book aloft.

“Not going to congratulate me?” Harry asked as he reached the front of the shop.

“Why should I?” Draco asked, raising his eyebrows.

Harry grinned at him. “Well I did find the book.”

Draco had to look away. Harry’s eyes sparkled when he beamed like that and Draco found it entirely too hard to resist. “And? You don’t see me asking for acclaim and I find things around here all the time.”

Harry snorted. “Not lately.”

“Often enough,” Draco said

“Not often enough lately,” Harry countered. “Let’s see, who found the gold picture frame? That was me. And what about the jewelry box with the little owls handpainted on the lid? Oh, that was me again. Or the—“

Draco scowled. “This isn’t a competition, Potter,” he interrupted.

Harry just grinned at him again. “You’re only saying that because if it *were* a competition, you’d be losing.”

Draco couldn’t argue with that, but Mrs. Dodson chose the perfect moment to enter the room with a full tea tray, and Draco hurried to take it from her while Harry went to arrange their chairs around the small table by the front window.

“Ooh, chocolate digestives,” Harry said as he caught sight of the plate of biscuits.

Draco preferred the ginger ones, personally, but the chocolate ones were Harry’s favorite. The sacrifice was a small enough one to make, especially when it meant he got to see Harry smile like that. It was so easy and took so little to make him smile, and Draco couldn’t understand why more people didn’t do it all the time.

“Friday,” Mrs. Dodson said, and Draco looked away from Harry to find her watching him fondly.

“What?” said Harry around a half-chewed biscuit.

“Nothing, dear,” Mrs. Dodson said as she poured the tea. “Now, I’ve been thinking of buying a new hat. Something current, you know.”

She settled down at her place and pulled out a clipping from the latest issue of *Fanciful Fashions* featuring a striking blue hat with a stunning plume of peacock feathers blooming from the hatband. Draco rather liked it and encouraged her to get it. Surprise, surprise, Harry disagreed.

Harry disagreed so much, in fact, that he was still disagreeing by the time they finished up tea and were leaving the shop.

“I really think you’re overreacting about this. It’s just some feathers, not a whole bird,” Draco said as they stepped out onto the street.

“There’s so many it might as well be, and besides, Augusta Longbottom has a hat with a whole vulture on it,” Harry pointed out.

“That's vintage, and vintage is *in* right now. Anyhow, we're not talking about a whole bloody vulture. Just maybe some sparrows wouldn’t be so bad. Certainly nothing bigger than a crow.” He hitched up one shoulder in half a shrug. “You know. Reasonable.”

“Reasonable?” Harry repeated incredulously. “Reasonable is not having a whole bird on your hat. Entire animals have no place on hats.”

“You really are overreacting,” Draco said. “I mean, mice were all the craze before, and that turned out fine.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. “Entire mice? That’s disgusting!”

“It absolutely is not. And anyhow, I don't see how it's any worse than feathers. It's all just animal bits.”

Harry gaped at him. “Oh my god, are you honestly telling me that you can't spot the difference between a few feathers and wearing an *entire taxidermied animal* on your head?”

Draco gave in to the urge to roll his eyes. “You obviously don't understand fashion,” He said and offered his arm. “Side-Along back?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Harry took his arm and Draco held him a little closer than was strictly necessary as he Apparated them back to the Ministry.

“Though I suppose I really can’t expect much from a man who wears those awful scuffed trainers and tatty jeans to work every day,” Draco continued as they walked back to their office.

Harry snorted. “This coming from the man whose wardrobe is stuck in the 1800s.”

“Waistcoats were popular through the early 1900s, I'll have you know,” Draco sniffed.

“That's still not this century, Draco,” Harry said, voice low and fond.

“I can’t help it if men’s fashion took a turn for the worse after that. And we absolutely won’t discuss those awful tee-shirts you insist on wearing all the time,” Draco said, and his voice reflected the warmth and amusement Harry’s held. For a long moment they just smiled at each other, then both realized they were staring and looked away.

Sometimes Draco wondered how Harry hadn’t yet noticed how much he liked him. He’d never bothered to hide it, and in fact had been fairly obvious at times, because honestly, who runs their whole hand through someone’s hair to pick out a bit of fluff? Maybe that’s really what Draco had been waiting for this whole time, some acknowledgement that Harry knew how he felt. Draco didn’t need much, just the littlest bit of flirting back. Standing a little closer than was proper. The casually intentional brush of his hand as they walked beside each other. Anything. But no, Harry always maintained an infuriatingly respectable distance.

Except for Friday nights. On Friday nights, they always left the pub together and walked the six and a half blocks to what Draco had come to think of as their corner. On their corner, Harry always let Draco stand a little too close as they shared their almost-kiss. Every week, as Harry softly said “Goodnight, Draco,” and Draco replied, “Goodnight, Harry,” he could tell that they were both thinking about kissing. But Harry never closed that small distance between them, and at the last moment Draco always lost his nerve.

It had become both the best and the most infuriating part of Draco’s week.

Back at their office, they shrugged out of their Auror robes, and Draco pretended not to notice the way that Harry stared. He was wearing a new shirt, a delicate shade of aquamarine that suited his complexion perfectly, and he’d paired it with an ivory waistcoat. After figuring out how much Harry seemed to like him in blue, Draco had taken to wearing the color more often, but was dismayed to realize that he apparently owned only three blue shirts. Hence the

new one, so he wouldn't have to resort to blatantly repeating outfits. It wouldn't do to be *too* obvious.

"Did you need something?" he asked, and Harry shook his head quickly and retreated behind his desk to keep working at his marbles.

He'd been doing rather well with them, progressing much quicker than Draco had thought he would. But that was just Harry Potter, wasn't it? Always exceeding everyone's expectations. For the first time in his life, that knowledge didn't fill Draco with seething jealousy and resentment, but rather a warm sort of pleasure. Maybe it was because he fancied Harry. Or maybe it was because he could still rest easy in the knowledge that this was one area that the great Harry Potter would never best him. Either way, it was a nice feeling, and Draco enjoyed it.

Draco watched as Harry cast another Wingardium Leviosa, and all but two of the marbles lifted up from the desk and pressed against the top of the Protego charm. The Sticking Charms had come off the desk last week, but they'd kept the Shield Charm. Harry scowled at the marbles and let them fall. Draco hid a smile and reached for a fresh sheet of parchment.

Thirty minutes later, Harry flicked his hand in frustration and the marbles flew up, scattering and clinking against the Shield Charm. "This is pointless," he said.

Draco removed his glasses and set them aside. "What's pointless?"

"This!" Harry huffed. He flicked his hand and the marbles clattered again. "I'm never going to get this. It's been over two weeks!"

Draco stood and walked to his side of the room. He stood in front of Harry's desk, arms folded over his chest, looking down his long nose at Harry. "Do you know how long it took me to do that thing with burning my name into a parchment?"

"I'm guessing it was more than two weeks," Harry said petulantly.

"Months," Draco said. "It took me *months*."

Harry looked up at him. "Why would you even bother?"

"Because I wanted to push my limits. I picked something I thought was next to impossible and forced myself to do it over and over until I made it work." And really, wandless and on house arrest as he awaited his trial after the war, it wasn't as if he had anything better to do with his time.

Harry's forehead creased in a frown. "But why? What's the point of putting so much effort into that? I mean, it's not even anything that useful."

"So I'd never be helpless again," Draco told him. "When I… At the end of the war, I was wandless a lot of the time. The Dark Lord taken my father's wand, you'd taken mine, and the three of us were sharing my mum's. So I did everything I could to ensure that if anything like

that ever happened again, I damned well wouldn't be helpless. I picked something hard to start with, and the rest was easy after that."

He remembered those long, awful nights, crouched on the hard stone hearth of his bedroom's fireplace, hand stretched out to the cold logs, casting Incendio after Incendio until finally after weeks of failure, one tiny spark caught the tinder. He could still remember how sweet that surge of triumph that rushed through him at that was, even more intoxicating than the very first time he'd cast a spell. That had been an Incendio too. It was why he'd started Harry out with Wingardium Leviosa. There was always something special about the very first spell a wizard cast.

With a wave of his hand, Draco dismissed the Shield Charm. "Now show me."

Harry frowned skeptically at him. "Without the Protego? Do you *want* me to destroy the office?"

Draco rolled his eyes at Harry's ridiculousness. "I doubt even you could destroy the whole office with a handful of marbles. Now show me."

Harry bit at his lower lip and stretched a hand out over the marbles on the desk. His brows drew together as he concentrated hard, and then said "Wingardium Leviosa!"

Nine of the ten marbles rose swiftly to the ceiling. Draco smiled and Vanished them with a wave of his wand.

"You're done," he said. "You've done it."

"But I didn't just lift the red one," Harry said. "And they went up to the ceiling."

"But you were in control of them. They didn't go flying all over the room," Draco said. "Honestly, you're probably never going to be able to lift just the red one. Maybe given more time you'll be able to stop them from floating quite so high, but for now this is probably as good as you'll get."

Harry scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Then why would you try to make me do something you knew I couldn't?"

"I needed you to aim for something beyond your capabilities," Draco said, and Harry still looked frustrated and a bit put out, so he went on, "And this really is an amazing improvement, don't think otherwise even for a minute." He eyed Harry speculatively for a moment, then smiled. "In fact, I do believe you're ready for the next step in your training."

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Harry returned to his office after lunch to find Draco studying the Handbook of Auror Regulations and Directives, glasses slipping down his nose as he read, one fingertip tracing

down the long columns of tiny print to keep his place.

“What, you haven’t got that thing memorized yet?” Harry asked as he shrugged out of his robes.

Draco slammed the book shut and peered at Harry over the rims of his glasses. “Unlike some Aurors I could mention, I prefer to keep up to date on current guidelines.” He sent the heavy tome flying to its spot on the shelf with a swish of his wand, and there was something just a little too defensive in his tone, but Draco continued before Harry could press him about it. “Williamson dropped off another load of customer records from Unalloyed, these going back one year. I’ve left your portion on your desk for you.”

With growing dismay, Harry turned to see two towering stacks of folders on his desk. “This is a lot more than last time.”

“Last time, they only requested customer records from the physical shop down in Diagon,” Draco said, leaning back in his chair and tucking his hands behind his head. “This time, they’ve requested all the owl orders as well.” He grinned and Harry knew he would hate whatever Draco said next. He wasn’t disappointed. “This is only A-E, by the way. We’ve got the rest waiting for us downstairs in Filing.”

He groaned. “And why can’t someone else help us with this? Verve isn’t even our case. We’re just *consulting*.”

“Because they all hate me,” Draco said cheerfully, reaching for a folder from his own looming stack and spreading it open on his desk. He plucked a quill from the holder and inked it neatly. “Also, they grudgingly admit that I’ll get through this faster than most other Aurors.”

“Only because you stay here half the night,” Harry muttered.

“Not as if I’ve got anything better to do,” Draco said without looking up. He ticked three marks into his folder in rapid succession.

“Dare I ask what the chances are of me getting home at a decent time tonight are?” Harry sighed.

“Nonexistent,” Draco said brightly. “Get to it, Potter, and you might bump them up to miniscule.”

Harry sighed, flung himself down into his chair, and got to it.

And by seven o’clock he was absolutely done with it. His eyes ached, his head felt muzzy, and his shoulders had begun to cramp from spending hours hunched over his desk. He stood and stretched.

“Come on, Draco, we’re leaving.”

“Not done,” Draco muttered.

“Yes, we are. I can’t stay in here another minute or I’m going to go completely mental.”

“By all means, go. Away, I mean, not mental.” Draco made another mark in his folder. “Merlin knows I’ve got enough trouble keeping this place neat with a sane Harry Potter around. You know you left your trainers on my side of the room again?”

“I did not,” Harry said, because he hadn’t. When he left things on Draco’s side of the room he often ended up getting them thrown at his head.

“They were under the sofa.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “The sofa’s neutral ground.”

“Obviously not since it’s always getting invaded by your things. If you’re going to leave your things around, please do it behind your desk where I don’t have to look at it.”

Harry sighed and didn’t bother to argue with him. “You’re leaving with me. We’re going to go get dinner, and then if you absolutely insist on continuing this, we’ll go back to my place.”

Draco’s head came up at that. “Your place?”

“Yeah, why not? It’s more comfortable than the office.” He shrugged. He’d only offered because he hated the thought of Draco sitting alone in their small office into the wee hours of the morning, but now that he’d said it aloud it sounded like far too intimate an offer.

“Really,” Draco said, raising his eyebrows. “And once we’re at your place, shall we braid each other’s hair and confess which boys we’ve got crushes on like a pair of giggling first year girls?”

No, there would be absolutely no confessing of which boy he had a crush on if Harry had anything to say about it. “No, we’ll continue to work but do it in a place that is not here, because frankly I am sick of here.” He stared at Draco for a moment, then played his trump card and said, “I’ll buy you Indian.”

Draco nodded with poorly feigned reluctance. “Very well, then.”

They cast Compression Charms over their stacks of folders and packed them away, and didn’t bother to put their robes back on before Harry led the way to the Indian place a few blocks down.

“Did you want curry again or are you feeling adventurous?” Harry asked him as they stepped inside accompanied by the bright jangling of bells, knotted along a black silk string tied to the door.

Draco shrugged. “I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

“Right.” Harry stepped up to the counter. “I’ll have two orders of the chicken biryani, one a seven and one a two. Oh, and two orders of naan, please.”

“What are the numbers?” Draco asked as Harry dug out his wallet to pay.

“How spicy they’ll make it,” he said, thumbing through the cash.

“You think I can’t handle it very spicy?” His chin came up and he had that infuriatingly stubborn tone to his voice.

Harry sighed. “Do you eat spicy food?”

“Well, no, but if you can handle it then I’m sure I can as well.”

That was remarkably similar to what Harry had thought to himself just before he’d set his bathroom on fire. “He’ll have a two,” he told the girl and paid as Draco continued to mutter indignantly. “Look, you can try some of mine. If you like it, you can order a higher number next time. Okay?”

“Fine,” Draco mumbled.

They went outside to wait for their food, and though the sun hadn’t gone down yet, the air had already begun to take on a bit of a chill. Draco cast a discreet Warming Charm over them both, then leaned up against the brick wall next to Harry, a little closer than Harry would have liked. Their elbows brushed and Harry folded his arms over his chest.

To his surprise, Draco didn’t immediately dive back into a lecture about potions ingredients. Instead they started with an incredibly bland discussion about how they both looked forward to the warmer temperatures of summer, and then Draco asked about how Hermione liked her new rotation at St. Mungo’s, and by the time Harry had finished reciting the impressive array of objects Hermione had so far removed from the noses of small witches and wizards, and listened to the story of how Draco had once convinced Pansy Parkinson to put a Bertie Bott’s Bean up her nose at the tender age of five and how she held it against him even through Hogwarts, their food was ready.

Harry led Draco into the narrow alley behind the restaurant, then Apparated them both to his living room.

“Well, Potter, this isn’t at all like I’d imagined,” he said, peering unabashedly around the room.

Harry looked around and tried to see it as if for the first time. High ceilings, tall windows, and polished wood floors were the things that stood out first, and had attracted him to this flat in the first place. Modestly sized Floo, which frankly could do with a bit of an upgrade. (Harry was fine with it but Ron was always banging his head on the way out.) Leather sofa and matching loveseat grouped around a small coffee table, flat screen television on the wall facing them, and a somewhat shabby red rug on the floor that Harry had bought second hand because it reminded him of the carpet in the Gryffindor dorms.

“Dare I ask what you imagined?”

“Something a lot messier than this,” Draco admitted. “I thought it’d be like your side of the office, only worse because you haven’t had me come in and clean up for you.”

“There’s always my bedroom if you’re disappointed,” Harry said, and immediately felt his cheeks flush hot. “Er. It’s, um, a lot messier than this, is all.”

Draco just raised his eyebrows, and Harry panicked a little. He hadn’t thought before he’d spoken, and then it had come out like some sort of stupid come-on, and even though he hadn’t meant it like that he was still a sort of afraid that Draco would interpret it like that and now that he was thinking about it, he couldn’t stop thinking about it because he very much would like to have Draco in his bedroom, though probably not right now because his bedroom really was a mess.

Harry held out the paper bag of takeaway like a shield. “We should eat before it gets cold!” he said.

Draco’s mouth twitched like he was fighting back a smile. “Right,” he said.

After Summoning plates and silverware from the kitchen, Harry unpacked the takeaway bag onto the coffee table.

“We’re eating here?” Draco asked.

Harry froze, packet of naan in one hand. “Um, yes? Unless you’d like to eat at the table?”

“No, no,” Draco said. “Here is fine.”

Really, Harry had just been operating on force of habit. Whenever Ron came over, they always sat in the living room. But Draco seemed fine with it as he sat down on the sofa and picked up the container marked with a number two. Harry sat down on the other end of the sofa and picked up his own container. He dumped half of it onto his plate, and his mouth watered as he caught a whiff of the aromatic steam that rose from his rice. He popped a forkful into his mouth.

“Not bad,” Draco said after sampling his own. “May I try yours?”

Abruptly, Harry remembered his earlier promise. “Sure. Just hang on a sec.”

He went to the kitchen and returned a minute later with a glass of milk. He set it down on the coffee table and motioned to his plate in a little go-ahead gesture. Draco took up a great big heaping forkful of rice and slid it into his mouth. Harry waited.

“Ack,” said Draco through his mouthful.

Harry nudged the glass of milk closer and Draco dropped his fork with a clatter to snatch it up. A drop of milk leaked from the corner of his and trickled down to his chin as he gulped, and Harry wanted to lick it up. The droplet quivered from the bottom of his chin as Draco gulped and gulped, throat bobbing as he swallowed, and Harry couldn’t look away. The glass was empty when Draco sat it down and his face had gone pink and his eyes watered.

“What is *wrong* with you?” he demanded and sniffed loudly.

“Quite a lot, I imagine,” Harry said, wrenching his eyes from the drop of milk on Draco’s chin. “You’ve got a little… just there.” He pointed at his own chin.

Draco swiped it away with the back of one hand. “How can you stand that? It’s like torture.” He eyed Harry suspiciously. “You’re not some sort of masochist, are you?”

Harry laughed. He was able to think a little clearer now that the milk was gone from Draco’s chin. “No, I guess I just have a higher tolerance for spicy food than you do.”

“You can keep it,” Draco said and picked up his own container again. With one last wary glance at Harry’s plate, he reached into his bag and pulled out a handful of folders and flipped the top one open on the coffee table before him.

Smiling, Harry did the same.

****

It took Draco until Wednesday to get things set up for the next phase of Harry’s training. They still went to the cabin every morning where Harry disarmed as wide a variety of unpleasant but nonlethal curses and hexes as Draco could dream up. And while he was improving steadily in disarming those, none of them were ones he would ever encounter in a real safe house.

But Draco didn’t want to have him learn to disarm the darker spells while also trying to recognize traps and identify the curses. So instead Draco picked a dozen of the most common spells used in traps and cast them on a dozen assorted paperweights beneath which he’d laid out neat squares of parchment listing all the pertinent information about each curse. When Harry grew comfortable disarming those, Draco planned to remove the parchments and have him identify each curse before disarming it. And when he mastered that, Draco would set up the cabin like a real safe house.

Harry walked back in from lunch and began unbuttoning his robes.

“You’re late, Potter,” Draco said without looking up.

“Five minutes,” Harry protested, then caught sight of his desk. “What’s all this?”

“This is step two of your training,” Draco said. He stood and followed Harry to his desk. “Each of those paperweights is cursed. I’ve labeled which spell I’ve used on each, and you’re going to disarm them.” He took in the eager smile that lit up Harry’s face. “A bit of a warning before you begin. I didn’t hold back on these. Those curses can hurt you. Some will kill you. I absolutely forbid you to work on them when I am not here. Understood?”

Harry sat down at his desk. “Why not? You’ve listed all the counter-curses right here.”

“Are you really that stupid or do you just pretend for my benefit?” Draco snapped at him. He knew for a fact that Harry was perfectly intelligent but sometimes he just didn’t *think* and it made Draco want to shake him. He stabbed a finger at a small pewter owl. “Bonegrinder Curse. Do you really think you’ll have the presence of mind to cast a counter-curse while every bone in your body is simultaneously turning into dust? Or the Boiling Breath Hex.” Draco pointed at a glass dog. “I’d love to know how you plan to cast when every breath you take slowly liquefies your lungs.” He paused to frown at Harry. “I know you think that death is something that happens *to other people* but I’d rather not take the chance that this time is the one that sticks.”

Harry rolled his eyes in that way that clearly said he thought Draco was overreacting, but he agreed, “Fine. No messing with them unless you’re here to save me.”

“*Thank you*,” Draco said as he stalked back to his side of the office. “Besides the fact that I’ve finally grown accustomed to having you around, I don’t even want to think what it’ll look like if you turn up dead from a curse that I’ve set.”

Draco settled into his paperwork and left Harry to it. He did quite well, disabling an Entrail-Expelling Curse with no incident. He’d just started in on the brass unicorn trapped with an Eyeball Exploding curse when the door opened and Weasley barged in.

“I hear there’s this thing that happens,” Draco said airily without looking up. “It’s rather a curious custom I’ve heard about but have yet to actually witness. When one wishes to enter a room that is not one’s own, he makes a fist and raps his knuckles rhythmically against the door before opening it.”

“Hello to you too, Malfoy,” Weasley said, then did a double-take. “Since when do you wear glasses?”

“Go piss up a hill, Weasley,” Draco muttered. He barely fought down the urge to remove his glasses.

Weasley just shrugged. “Hey, Harry,” he said, waving a folder. “I’ve finally got permission to pull you in on the Haldran case as a consult. Mind taking a look?”

Harry reached eagerly for the folder and leafed through it, instantly absorbed. Draco had absolutely no idea what this Haldran case was about, but clearly it was something lofty and dangerous if they wanted help from the Boy Who Lived on it.

“What’s with all the paperweights?” Weasley asked, reaching for a stone carved to look like a lotus blossom.

“Ron, stop!” Harry said, but it was too late.

Weasley picked it up, and instantly thin red seams traveled down his fingers. Weasley dropped the paperweight as the seams split open and the flesh began to peel back in long thin strips, leaving the stark white of bone clearly exposed. Blood ran down his arm and he made a half-choked gurgle of pain.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck,” Harry said, fumbling for the parchment with the counter-curse.

Draco leapt from his chair, snarling the counter-curse as he went, and the seams stopped growing. Weasley had gone pale and sweaty, and he clasped his uninjured hand around his forearm as he stared, horrified, at the strips of flesh dangling from his fingers like the limp skins of half-peeled bananas.

Draco pointed his wand. “This is going to hurt like hell,” he warned.

“Fucking do it,” Weasley ground out between clenched teeth.

Draco cast, and Weasley screamed as the skin on his fingers fused itself back together in a searing flash of light, leaving thin scars that ran from his fingertips down to his knuckles. Draco spelled away the blood, and Weasley cautiously flexed his hand.

“I’m not a Healer,” Draco said. “So you might want to go get that checked out at St. Mungo’s. They’ll probably be able to do something about the scarring, too.” He tucked his wand away.

Weasley stared at him for a long minute, then turned to Harry. “Why *the fuck* do you have that on your desk?”

“Remember how I told you about Draco giving me some extra training? Well, this is it,” Harry said. “Are you all right?”

Weasley examined his hand. “Hermione’s going to kill me if I go home like this.”

Harry leaned over to get a better look at the scars on Weasley’s fingers. “You’re probably right. I’ll go to St. Mungo’s with you, if you want. You’ll have to fill out an incident report when you get treated, so I might as well be around for questioning.” He reached for his Auror robes.

“But didn’t Malfoy—“ Weasley began.

“It was on my desk. It was my curse,” Harry said. “I’m responsible.” He flicked a glance at Draco.

“But…” Draco began, frowning.

“It was my curse, I’m responsible,” Harry repeated as he picked up the parchment Draco had filled out with the details of the Flaying Curse and stuffed it into a pocket. “I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?”

And they were gone.

Stunned, Draco still had the presence of mind to throw a Shield Charm over the rest of the cursed paperweights on Harry’s desk. Harry had just protected him, had willingly taken the blame for Weasley’s injury even though it meant questioning and an incident report and extra paperwork and possible disciplinary action. Admittedly, whatever disciplinary action Harry

would get, if any, would be a slap on the wrist compared to whatever they would have done to Draco.

And it was funny, wasn't it, that just a month earlier Draco would have been incensed to have Harry protect him. Now it just filled him with a warm pleasure, and suddenly Draco didn't need any further confirmation of Harry's feelings, not flirting or accidentally-on-purpose touching or thinly-veiled words. Harry was too straightforward for that. When he cared for someone, he took care of them.

Like he had just done for Draco.

Draco sat back at his desk, and because there was no one around, he didn't bother to stop himself from grinning like a loon. He slipped his hand into his pocket and ran his fingertip over the ridges of the bottle cap. Suddenly, Friday couldn't get here fast enough.

****

On Thursday, they were dispatched to take care of another newly-discovered safe house. Even though Harry was still working his way through disabling safely labeled paperweights, Draco had deemed him advanced enough to at least accompany him, though not advanced enough to escape a lecture that basically boiled down to 'Don't touch anything or you'll probably die.'

After having seen Ron's fingers peel themselves after the paperweight incident, Harry was more than willing to listen.

So now they stood in front of a dilapidated old Victorian mansion squatting in the middle of a weed-choked yard. Because Harry wasn't Marked and there was no easy way to tell what the wards would do without triggering them, Draco had stepped just inside the property line to disable them before they could begin on the house itself. Harry resigned himself to waiting and leaned against the wrought iron fence with a little sigh. Instantly, something caught his attention back inside the house itself. Straightening, he frowned and stepped closer for a better look.

And there it was again, flickering past the broad front window overlooking the porch so quickly that he didn't catch anything more than a quick flash of motion. He stepped forward without thinking.

"Harry, what are you doing?"

Harry barely heard the question. "There's something…" He trailed off, because he saw it again, and suddenly it was the most important thing in the world to see it up close, to find out what it was.

“Stop. Harry, stop,” Draco said, and Harry pushed him gently aside as he started up the front walk.

The world seemed to fall away as Harry moved forward, the sunshine, the wind rustling the trees, everything except the house and that all-consuming need to be inside it now. He vaguely heard Draco telling him to stop, barely noticed when Draco tried to pull him back. He shook off Draco’s hands and kept walking. Draco moved in front of him again, blocking Harry’s view of the house.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and then drove his fist into Harry’s face.

Harry staggered back a step and the world came rushing back in a bright hot surge of pain as blood gushed from his nose. Draco grabbed him by one arm and hauled him along, not stopping until they were across the street.

“Ow,” Harry said. His eyes had gone all teary and he blinked rapidly. “What the fuck was that for?”

“Do you even realize what you were doing?” Draco demanded. His voice had gone high and tight. He was scared and trying not to show it.

“I wasn’t doing anything,” Harry said. Gingerly, he poked at his nose. Fuck, but that hurt. “I was just… Oh.”

“Yes. Oh,” Draco snapped, his voice so tight it trembled. “You very nearly… Here.” He pried Harry’s hand away from his face and his voice softened as he said, “I’m sorry. I think I broke it.”

“Again,” Harry couldn’t help but point out.

“Episkey,” Draco said, and Harry’s nose crunched as it realigned itself. Draco spelled the blood away from his face, then cast a few healing charms on his own hand. “I really am sorry I had to do that, but it was the easiest way to break the spell.”

Harry stared up at the house. He didn’t see anything in the window now. “What was that?” With the pain from his nose gone, he was all too aware of the sick churn of his stomach. He began to shiver.

“That,” Draco said, “is a Bellatrix house. And you are not going anywhere near it.” He looked at Harry. “For the love of Merlin, sit down before you fall over.”

Harry’s body was shaking badly now and he took Draco’s advice, sitting down on the pavement. He ground his teeth together to keep them from chattering, and Draco squatted next to him and rubbed his hand between Harry’s shoulder blades in small, soothing circles.

“What’s happening to me,” Harry forced out through clenched teeth.

“It’s unpleasant, isn’t it?” Draco said with a sigh. “This is just the backlash from the ward’s hold on you breaking. You’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

His hand continued to rub up and down Harry's spine, and Harry couldn't help but lean into the touch as the trembling slowly lessened and his nausea faded.

"There, now," Draco said. "I'm going to go take care of the wards. And then I'm going to have to go disable the time bomb. Bellatrix always set one, and the timer is always short."

"You're going in alone?" Harry asked, fighting down a wave of anxiety at the thought of Draco going in there without him. "But—"

"No buts, Potter," Draco interrupted. "It's dangerous."

"Exactly why I won't let you go by yourself."

"I'm going to need to move quickly. I can't do that while minding you."

Harry stared at him. "If it was the other way around, would you let me go marching off to throw myself in harm's way and be perfectly fine to sit back and watch, knowing that if something went wrong you wouldn't be able to come help me?"

Draco winced, and Harry knew that his words had hit their mark. "Fine. I must be mental for agreeing to this, but fine. Rules!" he said, stabbing a finger at Harry. "I'm going activate the safe path through the house. The timer won't start unless we leave the path. We'll go in, see what we can see from there, then I am going to go disarm the bomb and you are not going to leave that path no matter what. Am I understood?"

"Perfectly," Harry said. That'd be enough. If something went wrong, he could probably cast an Accio strong enough to pull Draco over to him and then Apparate them both out.

"Good," Draco said. "I'm going to go take care of the wards, and then we'll begin." He stood up, his fingers brushing against the nape of Harry's neck in a brief, fond caress that was over before Harry could even really enjoy it.

Harry watched Draco cross the street, taking a moment to admire the long lines of him as he walked. It was getting harder and harder to pretend that he didn't feel anything for Draco, and Draco certainly wasn't making it easy on him. When Harry had offered for them to be friends after that first pub night, he'd thought that would be that. They'd just continue on as they had been, maybe with a bit less arguing. But Draco had turned out to be much more physically affectionate than Harry had thought he would, and it was becoming a real struggle to keep from reacting. Draco never did anything blatant or untoward. Instead, the problem was that even the smallest accidental touch was enough to send Harry's heart racing.

Harry gave himself a swift mental kick.

Now was not the time to be mooning over Draco. They had work to do. He stood up and watched as Draco set to work disabling the wards, waiting for Draco's signal that it was safe to join him.

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Friday night, when it finally came, felt like it arrived far too soon. Draco had spent the entire day with butterflies in his stomach at the thought of what he was going to do later. Once they'd arrived at the pub, however, Draco felt much calmer. That might be the influence of the drinks he'd had, but either way, Draco embraced it. Being here felt comfortable and familiar, though he was still a little surprised by how well he'd fallen in with the Golden Trio.

"Watch this," Draco murmured to Granger once he judged Harry sufficiently pissed. "I think Granger would look nice in that hat with the hummingbirds, don't you think, Potter?" he said loudly.

Harry sighed into his pint glass. "Whole birds, Draco, I haven't changed my opinion."

"Well it's not as if we're talking about a whole vulture," Draco pointed out. "Just maybe the sparrows…"

Harry rolled his eyes and sat his glass back onto the table with thud. "Oh my god, don't even start that shit again. Yes, I know, sparrows, perfectly reasonable, whatever, but where is the line, Draco, where is the bloody line? And do not give me any bullshit about it being *vintage*." Harry's hands leapt up to form air quotes around the word. "Or how it's dramatic. I'd like to see you buy that blue hat with the full spread of peacock feathers featured in the last issue of *Fanciful Fashions* and then wear it around the Manor. We'll see how much you like dramatic when every bloody peacock on the grounds mistakes it as a mating show and tries to fornicate with your head."

Harry broke off from his monologue to find Granger staring at him in rapt disbelief and Draco grinning at him with barely-restrained glee.

"Why Harry," Granger said with a laugh. "I had no idea you were such an expert on ladies' hats."

"I'm going to go talk to Richardson. Richardson is nice to me," Harry said, aimed a scowl at Draco, then stalked off.

"So are you going to tell me what that was about?" Granger asked Draco, and Draco obligingly told her all about Mrs. Dodson.

It was hard to keep his focus on the story, however, with Harry standing just a few tables away, smiling and laughing and looking so handsome that it was all Draco could do to keep from going up to him right this minute and kissing him the way he'd wanted to for weeks. Be patient, he told himself, just a little while longer. It's going to happen tonight.

"If you'll excuse me, I'm going to try to buy back Harry's affections with a pint," Draco said as he stood.

"Best of luck," Granger said, and when she raised her glass to take a sip of cider, Draco couldn't resist.

He already felt sure that Harry liked men, but since the opportunity had presented itself so neatly, he might as well confirm it. He leaned down. “Granger,” he said quickly into her ear. “Is Potter gay?”

Granger choked on her cider.

And that was all the answer that Draco needed. “Thanks,” he said cheerfully, leaving her sputtering and coughing behind him as he wove his way between tables to the bar.

Now that he was setting his plan in motion, Draco’s nervousness had all but disappeared, replaced instead by flutters of excitement. He’d buy Harry a drink and make it a point to stick close to him for the rest of the night. They’d leave together, as usual, and then soon after they’d be on their corner, standing just a little bit closer than was appropriate for two men who were just coworkers. And then came Draco’s favorite part of each week, that moment just before they parted, that split second of indecision where Harry would look at him, eyes wide and dark with longing, and come *thisclose* to kissing him just before he murmured a hasty goodbye and turned around and hurried up the sidewalk.

He always looked back.

Tonight, all Draco had to do was ensure that their almost-kiss turned into an actual kiss. He didn’t think it’d be too hard to push Harry over the edge. Just a light touch to the back of his wrist, angling his head down a little, maybe whispering his name. And then Harry would screw up all that famous Gryffindor courage and close that space between them and then Draco could use the warm soft press of his lips against Harry’s to finally say all the things he couldn’t bring himself to put into words.

He didn’t think they'd go home together tonight, Harry seemed much too noble and gentlemanly for that. But there would certainly be some amount of snogging, preferably up against the lamppost, and then they'd set up a date, an actual date, and then—

Draco bumped into another person, breaking him away from his musings. He looked up to find that he’d walked into a man who might pass for his twin at a glance, tall and slim and blond, but with brown eyes and a somewhat rounder face and a thick-framed pair of black rectangular glasses.

“Sorry, I wasn’t watching where I was going,” he said, and gestured for the other man to go up to the bar first.

The man grinned. “Thanks, mate, I’ve been out of the country for a while and I’m about ready to kill for a decent pint,” he said in the thickest Scottish brogue Draco had heard this side of McGonagall.

While the man ordered, Draco looked back at Harry, who nodded along and smiled at something Richardson said, then said something himself as he gestured broadly with one hand. Draco couldn’t help but smile as he watched, and slipped a hand into his pocket to rub his thumb over the smooth top of his bottle cap. Just for luck.

“What can I get for you?” the bartender asked.

Draco ordered two pints of lager and dropped a handful of coins onto the bar in payment. He squeezed his way back through the crowd, looking away from his goal as he dodged a witch teetering along on ridiculously tall heels whose weaving path unexpectedly crossed his own. He looked up just in time to see the blond man he'd bumped into near the bar set the pint he'd ordered on Harry's table and tap Harry on the shoulder.

"David!" Harry exclaimed loud enough for Draco to hear halfway across the bar, and threw himself at the man.

To anyone watching, they looked like two friends who hadn't seen each other in a long time, but Draco knew better. He knew *Harry* better. He saw the way Harry's hand lingered just a little too long on the man's – David's – arm, how they stood a little too near each other, and that adoring smile that lit up Harry's whole face, well, Draco had thought that smile was just for him.

He didn't realize he'd frozen in the middle of the room until Granger marched up to him and plucked a pint glass from his hand. "Oh, you've gotten me a drink!" she said loudly. "How kind of you."

Somehow, Draco managed to wrench his eyes away from Harry's beaming face and looked down at her. He thought he should say something but words wouldn't come.

"Get it together, Malfoy," she said briskly. "I can read your whole heart on your face."

Draco felt his expression slide into a bland nothing, and Granger nodded her approval as she looped her arm through his and steered him back to their corner table. Weasley had returned from wherever he'd gone off to and now lounged in the far seat.

"I see you got her a pint but not me," Weasley said even though his own pint glass was only half empty.

"Sorry, Weasley, but you're going to have to get a hell of a lot prettier before I start buying you drinks," Draco said. He felt wooden, but Weasley laughed while Granger shot Draco another pity-laden glance. "So," he said, striving for a casualness that he didn't feel. "Who's that bloke with Harry?"

Weasley craned his neck, and then his face lit up. "David! Hey Hermione, David's back."

"I see that," Granger said. "So I was thinking—"

"Who's David?" Draco asked, cutting her off before she could change the subject.

"He's Harry's… uh…" Weasley began, then cut himself off when Hermione kicked him. She didn't even try to be subtle about it.

"His boyfriend?" Draco asked, and lowered his voice. "I know he's gay."

Weasley looked relieved. "Yeah, well, sort of. David's a Curse-Breaker so he's gone a lot of the time, so they're together and all, just not *official* about it. I keep hoping David'll take up with Gringotts so he'll be around more often."

“And how long have they been together?” Draco asked, and Merlin, he just couldn’t help it. Each answer was like salt in an open wound, but like picking at a scab or prodding at a sore tooth, he couldn’t stop himself.

“Um,” said Weasley, and his eyes rolled ceilingward as he counted in his head. “Four years?”

“Three years,” Granger corrected with a small sigh and another pitying glance at Draco. “And seven months.”

Draco thought his ribs would crack beneath the enormous pressure that swelled in his chest. Harry had been seeing someone for that long and hadn’t bothered to tell Draco about it. Fucking hell, he thought they were friends. If he’d bloody well said something about it, Draco wouldn’t have bothered to get his hopes up. Ridiculously, he felt betrayed. He dug his fingernails into his palms and was considering excuses to make an early exit when Harry dragged his boyfriend-of-three-years-and-seven-months over to their table.

There was a lot of hugging and back slapping for Weasley, and Granger got hugs and air kisses, and the whole time Harry stood there just beaming like a loon, and Draco wanted to hex him for looking so damned happy. He glowered into his pint.

Harry touched him lightly on the shoulder. “Draco, I’d like you to meet David.”

“Draco Malfoy, right?” David asked with a wide, easy smile that Draco instantly hated. He put out his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Draco’s lip curled and he flicked a contemptuous glance at the proffered hand but made no move to take it. “A pleasure,” he said in a frigid tone of voice that said he thought it was anything but.

David frowned and dropped his hand. Harry looked uncertainly between them.

“Draco,” he began.

“Honestly, Potter,” Draco sneered. “I don’t know why you insist trying to introduce more of your little friends to me when I barely tolerate these.” He gestured to Granger and Weasley.

“Hey!” Weasley began, and Granger cut him off with a hand on his arm and a quiet, “Ron.”

“What’s gotten into you?” Harry demanded, his expression caught somewhere between irritation and confusion.

“Nothing but the sudden realization that I’ve got better things to do than hang about with you lot.” He stood so fast that his chair nearly toppled over. “I’m leaving.”

“Draco!” Harry called after him.

Draco ignored him, ignored everything as he shoved between tables and chairs and laughing groups of people. He barged through the door and fled down the sidewalk. He made it two buildings down when he realized he still held his pint glass. He hesitated, and wanted to take it back in but couldn’t face them all. He climbed up the three shallow steps to a shop front

and settled down in the dark alcove of their doorway. He'd just finish it up out here, then. Might as well, since he'd paid for it. He'd just sit here, indulge in one momentary wallow in self-pity at the unfairness of the universe, and then he'd stand up, and go home, and forget all about Harry bloody Potter.

Draco hadn't intended to wait for Harry. He certainly hadn't intended to follow him, but fifteen minutes later, when Harry walked by with David and Draco overheard his name, well, how could he not?

He set the pint glass aside and cast a Disillusionment Charm over himself and a Muffling Charm over the soles of his shoes before he stood up and trailed after them.

"…don't see how you can stand to be around him," David was saying.

"He did take a bit of getting used to, I'll admit," Harry said. "But he's not so bad once you get to know him."

"He seemed pretty bad tonight."

Harry shrugged, a quick hitch of his shoulders. "I don't know what's got into him tonight. Long week, I guess." He sighed. "It's a shame, I really wanted you to meet him. I really think the two of you would get on."

Draco didn't think that was bloody likely.

"I can't imagine what I'd have in common with a Death Eater," David said, and Draco couldn't resist aiming a quick Tripping Jinx at the wanker.

David stumbled and nearly went down, and Draco's satisfaction turned to burning jealousy as Harry steadied him with a hand to the arm and a murmured, "Careful, there," and then didn't let go. "And don't say that about him."

"Well he was," David pointed out. Draco glared at where his arm linked with Harry's and debated the wisdom of a second Tripping Jinx.

"Yes, but it's more complicated than that. I don't blame him for anything he did. He was barely more than a child, and stuck in a shitty situation. If I'd been in his place, I don't know that I would have been brave enough to turn my back on my family and my entire upbringing, and throw myself at the mercy of my enemies."

For a moment, a spark of warmth curled behind Draco's ribs to hear Harry leaping to his defense, but then his eyes caught on their linked arms and disappointment crushed it out.

"Anyhow," Harry continued when David didn't say anything. "I really do think you'd get on with Draco, if he decides to not be a giant twat the next time you meet him. He's really good at breaking curses, you know. Even thought about becoming a Curse-Breaker himself," Harry said, and launched into a description of their work with the safe houses and the training they'd been doing, and the warmth and obvious affection for Draco in his voice as he talked made Draco's heart ache with a sudden wave of longing so fierce it nearly pulled him under.

From there, the conversation turned to David's work, and he was in the middle of a story about exploring an ancient temple in Egypt when they reached their corner. Part of Draco wanted to keep following, but his feet wouldn't move. Instead, he just stood at the corner, at *their* corner where they should have been kissing tonight, watching them walk away, hearing Harry's laughter float back to him on the clear night air.

This time, Harry didn't look back.

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As they reached his flat and Harry unlocked the door to let them in, all he could think of was how much he'd rather be taking a different blond home. He watched as David walked in, leaving Harry to lock up, and flopped down on the sofa with an easy familiarity that Harry usually loved. But tonight all he could think of was how Draco had looked in here earlier this week, how he'd sat on the edge of the sofa cushion almost primly. Harry had talked him into coming back here again on Wednesday, bribing him that time with Thai, and discovered the unique torture that was watching Draco Malfoy eat noodles. They'd gone through another whole stack of folders, while Harry pretended that he wasn't thinking about pressing Draco back on the sofa cushions and snogging him senseless.

Harry hung his keys on their hook by the door and firmly put all thoughts of Draco from his mind as he joined David on the sofa. Draco, he couldn't have. But David was right here, and Harry hadn't had sex in almost six months. Maybe a good shag was just what he needed to help him get over this ridiculous fascination with Draco.

"I'm glad you're back," he said and leaned in for a kiss, but David turned away and Harry's lips only brushed his cheek. He pulled back, confused.

"Harry, I'm sorry," David said. "I should have told you earlier."

Frowning, Harry settled on the sofa beside him. "Told me what?"

David hesitated and forced himself to meet Harry's eyes. "I've met someone. We've been seeing each other for a few months, actually."

Harry blinked at him, surprised but not really shocked. He'd always known this was a possibility. They'd never agreed to be exclusive, what with David being gone so much of the time, but Harry had never really been interested in anyone else, until now at least, and he'd just assumed that David hadn't either.

"I'm so sorry," David went on. "I know I should have told you when it happened, but I wanted to make sure it was working first, and then it didn't seem to be the sort of thing to tell you in a letter. I thought I should tell you in person. I felt I owed you that."

"Right," Harry said. It suddenly made sense why he hadn't heard from David in so long.

David watched him warily. “Are you angry with me?”

Harry felt that he should be angry. Or hurt or disappointed or *something*, and he waited for it to hit him. But nothing came, not anger, not hurt, not even disappointment. Just surprise fading into an unexpected sense of relief that this on-again-off-again sort-of relationship had finally reached some sort of stability, along with a slow and unexpected swell of happiness for David.

“I’m not angry,” he said, and then grinned because it was true. “Really, I’m not. Honestly, I think that this thing with us hasn’t been going anywhere for a while now, it’s just that neither of us had met anyone better.”

A small pang of jealousy lanced through him at that. Now they’d both met someone better, except Harry would still be alone because his someone was straight and uninterested.

David completely misinterpreted the look on his face. “I’ll go stay somewhere else, if you’d like.”

“No, stay. It’s fine. We’re still friends, aren’t we?” Harry insisted, then hesitated. “Unless you don’t think it’d be proper for you to stay here, now that I’m your ex and you’ve got a new boyfriend. I’ve only got the one bedroom, but we could transfigure the sofa into a bed for you…”

“That’ll be fine,” David said. “I’d rather not get a hotel, since I’d planned on spending as much time with you as I could. You’re one of my closest friends, Harry, and you see…” He scrubbed a hand through his hair, making it stand on end. “This is pretty much goodbye.”

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes. “Isn’t it always with you?”

“No, no. I mean, goodbye for real. I’m leaving Europe, probably for good. There’s a huge demand for Curse-Breakers over in Asia, and Caliban’s already accepted a permanent position there…”

“Oh,” said Harry. “That sort of goodbye.” And even though he knew it might be years before he saw David again, he still didn’t feel anything beyond a small bittersweet pang. He only saw David a few times a year now. This would be a change, yes, but not a big one. “When are you leaving?”

“Next Saturday,” David said. “I have an early Portkey.” He pulled a face. “Really bloody early.”

“Well,” said Harry with a small smile. “I guess we’ll just have to make the most of this, then. I’m going to miss you, you know.” He settled back on his end of the sofa and tucked his feet up under him. “Now, tell me all about this man who’s stolen you away from me.”

David laughed, and did. He told Harry all about how he and Caliban had met while Curse-Breaking in Egypt, and even went so far as to pull out a picture of him. Harry peered down at the photo of David and Caliban standing close together amid an endless stretch of sand. Caliban was as tall as David, with dark skin and short dark hair and a smile that turned from

pleasant to blinding when he sneaked a glance over at David. They looked right together, and Harry told David as much as he handed the photo back.

Eventually the yawns punctuating their conversation grew too many to ignore, and they agreed it was time for bed. Harry went to fetch spare linens while David transfigured the sofa. Things were momentarily awkward as Harry handed over the stack of sheets and blankets.

“Well,” he said. “I’ll just, um. That is…” He gestured vaguely to his bedroom.

David laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous, Harry,” he said and swept Harry into a hug.

Harry slid his arms around David and relaxed into his embrace. God, it’d been so long since he’d been touched by someone like this, all comforting warmth and the reassuringly solid pressure of strong arms around him and another body pressed firmly against his own. From where he stood with his chin hooked over David’s shoulder, all Harry could see was a blur of blond hair out of the corner of his eye. It wasn’t the right shade of blond – honey rather than platinum – but that didn’t keep Harry from pretending it was Draco he held. He caught himself a moment later and sighed.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said, forcing himself away from what-ifs and back to the present. Gently, he pulled himself free of David’s arms. “I’m glad we’ve got the chance for a proper goodbye.” And he was. This thing with David had gone on for long enough that Harry thought it’d be a good thing for him to have some sort of closure for it. Move on, that sort of thing.

Now if only he had someone he could move on *to*. Harry tried again to put Draco from his mind as he and David said goodnight, and Harry went into his bedroom. He undressed and tossed his clothes in the general direction of his laundry basket before he crawled into bed and kicked his feet a few times to untwist the tangle of sheets and blankets enough that he could curl up underneath them. A few minutes later he heard snores coming from his living room, and Harry sat up with a small huff of irritation. David snored like the Hogwarts Express, Harry had no idea how he’d managed to forget that. He groped for his wand, aimed a Silencing Charm at the door, and the snores cut off.

Flopping back against his pillow, Harry wondered whether Draco snored. Probably not, perfect pureblood that he was. He probably slept without rumpling the bedsheets and woke up with not even one ridiculously blond hair out of place. Harry sighed and rolled over, and thought wistfully that he wished he’d get the chance to find out.

Chapter 9

After the crushing disappointment of Friday night and a weekend that had been appropriately grey and dismal, Monday morning dawned clear and blue and bright. Draco hated everything about it. He hated the birds cheerfully chirping outside his window, hated the tulips blooming in his front garden bed, hated the sunshine and the brisk breeze and above all, he hated Harry I've-got-a-bloody-boyfriend Potter.

That latter hate was, of course, a familiar one, as worn and comfortable as an old pair of shoes, and Draco wrapped himself up in it in a way he hadn't done since Hogwarts. He embraced hating Potter, because as long as he put every inch of himself into hating the stupid git, he could mostly forget just how much he liked him.

He hated Potter's stupid hair while he got dressed. He hated Potter's abysmal taste in clothing while he cleaned his teeth. He started to hate Potter's hideous glasses while he made his tea, but then remembered that Potter's glasses weren't hideous anymore thanks to him, and threw his teacup against the wall in a fit of pique. After a quick Reparo, Draco decided that maybe it would be best to stop thinking about Potter at all for a while. He brewed a fresh cup and made some toast, and after he'd finished his breakfast, a glance at the clock assured him that he still had more than enough time to walk to work.

Lovely. A nice walk would help to get his mind off… things. Especially things with stupid hair and abysmal taste in clothing and no-longer-hideous glasses. Things with *boyfriends*. Draco gritted his teeth and tried to stop thinking at all. After shrugging into a light coat, Draco set out. He followed the same path he always did, past the long row of terraced houses that made up his block, then onto the busier avenue that held a faint scattering of cafés and small shops in between more apartment buildings. He nodded good morning to the same people he always saw, gave a quick pat to the fat orange tabby that always took a morning nap on that particular wall, and crossed to the other side of the road when that horrid woman with the badly dyed hair approached with her small dog. The little yapping shit always tried to bite Draco's ankles, and he'd learned to avoid it.

As it turned out, it was a blessing in disguise to have been forced to cross the street, because it meant that they had the whole street between them when he walked another half a block and saw *him*. Or rather, *them*. Just there, sitting at small table outside a café, deep in conversation and sipping drinks from white china cups. David's legs stretched to Harry's side of the table and the side of his foot pressed against the side of Harry's. As he watched, David said something that made Harry tip his head back and laugh, and then David turned his head and his eyes met Draco's across the street.

For long minutes, Draco felt frozen, unable to move or breathe or think, unable to do anything but stand there like a bleeding moron and stare back. And then David's expression creased into a curious frown, and Draco did the only thing he could.

He fled.

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"I think that was your partner just there," David said, turning in his chair to peer up the street.

Harry followed the direction he was looking and sure enough, there was Draco. It had to be him, no one else had hair that color. It was like a beacon. "Yeah, I guess that was. He does live around here, and I know he walks to work sometimes when the weather's nice."

When David turned back, he looked deep in thought. "So, you were telling me a bit about him last night. How you've come to be friends. Are you… sure that's all?"

Harry sipped at his coffee. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's just that from what you say, he's really changed. Enough that from the way you describe it, you like spending time with him, and he's friendly enough now, right?" David said, and paused until Harry nodded. "But he was so rude last night when you brought me over to introduce me, and just now when he saw us he had the strangest look on his face."

"Oh?" Harry asked with a frown. "Like what?" He took another sip from his cup.

David glanced back up the street. "Like he was jealous."

It was so absurd that Harry couldn't help but laugh. "You might need to get your glasses checked, because there's absolutely no reason for Draco Malfoy to be jealous of me. And anyhow, we're past all that now."

David frowned at him. "I didn't mean—"

"Look, I've got to get to work now. If he's already on his way, he'll gripe at me for being late. We're still on for lunch, right? Meet me in the Atrium and we'll go from there?" Harry asked, gathering up his things as he stood.

David's frown deepened. "Yes, but—"

But Harry was already hurrying off down the sidewalk. "See you then!"

He kept his pace a little brisker than he normally did. He didn't know what had gotten into Draco on Friday night, but on the off chance that he was still in a snit this morning then Harry didn't need to give him any further reason to be snippy.

Harry snorted to himself as he replayed David's words in his head. Draco Malfoy jealous of him? How completely ridiculous.

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Draco had only just settled in at his desk when Potter burst into the room, hair wind-tousled and cheeks pink and glasses just slightly askew. He looked endearingly disheveled, and that made Draco angry.

“You’re late,” he snapped.

Harry glanced at the clock. “By two minutes,” he said. “I’ve been putting in so much overtime lately that I think I’m entitled to two minutes.” He dumped his bag by his desk. “Will we be going to the cabin today?”

Draco hesitated. He’d spent most of yesterday afternoon at the cabin, working out his frustrations by setting up the most devious traps he could. Though he’d used non-lethal spells – he still didn’t think Harry had reached a level where he could safely disarm the really dangerous ones – the way he’d set them up was so far above Harry’s capabilities that he’d likely set off most of them. He hadn’t intended to take Harry there today, and had a whole new set of cursed paperweights for him to work with instead. But as he looked at Harry and his mind flashed back to him and his *boyfriend* sitting so cozily together at the café, he changed his mind.

“Yes,” Draco said, standing. “I think we shall.”

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Harry looked at the hands of the clock and willed them to move faster. In just twenty more minutes he could escape to lunch with David and not have to put up with any of Draco’s shit for one whole glorious hour. He’d been in a strop all morning, colder and more distant than he’d even been on the first day they’d been assigned to each other as partners. Harry had made several attempts at conversation and been shut down quite firmly each and every time.

At the cabin, Draco hadn’t been the patient and supportive teacher he’d been on their previous trips there. Instead, he’d been almost Snape-like in his quickness to criticize every mistake Harry made, all the while still refusing to so much as look at Harry if he didn’t have to. By the end of it, Harry had been so desperate that he deliberately set off a Concussive Curse, because that always seemed to cheer Draco up. But Draco had just scowled at him and fired off the healing spell that made Harry’s ears stop ringing. That was when Harry decided that something was very wrong.

Back in their office, Draco had immediately retreated behind his desk and buried himself in paperwork, glaring down at the documents with such intensity that Harry was a little afraid they might burst into flame. He looked at the clock again. Eighteen minutes. Harry glanced back at Draco and felt a little guilty about being so eager to get away from him.

Harry sighed. He'd make one more gesture. Just one, and if Draco didn't go for it he'd give up for the day. "Hey Draco?"

"What?" Draco snapped at him without looking up.

Harry swallowed down his frustration. "It's nearly time for lunch."

"I'm not hungry."

"And I was wondering," Harry pressed on. "If you'd like to come have lunch with me and David."

Draco snapped his folder shut and shot a glare at Harry. "I can assure you that I have no desire to see you with your *boyfriend*," he sneered.

And then it all made sense to Harry. Why Draco had gotten so peevish once he'd seen Harry and David together. Why he was still so upset this morning. He remembered Draco snapping at Harry to get dressed when they were trapped together, lest his father assume he was *a homosexual*. Harry's blood boiled. "I thought you'd gotten past all that prejudiced shit, but I guess you just swapped in one for another," he said, and was impressed with the way he didn't shout.

The irritated look on Draco's face melted away, leaving him utterly gobsmacked. "You think I'm upset you're gay?" he asked incredulously.

Harry's righteous fury faltered. "Er, you're not?"

Now Draco looked almost indignant. "Of course not," he sniffed. "That would be entirely hypocritical of me."

Harry gaped at him. "Wait, you mean you're, er…?"

Draco flushed a little but his chin came up. "Yes."

"But if…"

Harry trailed off as he thought back to that oven trap again, and how Draco had quietly admitted to being a virgin, saying no one wanted to sleep with a former Death Eater, and it struck Harry like a bludger to the head. David had been right, Draco really was jealous, and how could he not be? He'd felt exactly the same when Ron and Hermione had first gotten together. He'd been so jealous of their relationship sometimes that it hurt, that they had each other while he was alone.

"You're jealous," he breathed. "That's why it upset you so much to see me with David. Because you're jealous."

For a long moment, Draco seemed to freeze in place. Then it was if all the layers he used to hide himself away peeled back like a flower blooming. He watched Harry intently, his eyes more open and honest than Harry had ever seen as he said simply, "Yes."

“Oh,” Harry said, and wanted so badly to touch him, to hold him and make him understand that it would all be okay. “Oh Draco, why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I wanted to,” Draco said, his voice stiff in that way that Harry knew meant he felt especially vulnerable. “I was going to, on Friday.”

“You should have. You can tell me anything, you know,” Harry said.

A nervous laugh escaped Draco. “I wish I had. I suppose it’s too late, though.”

“It’s not too late,” Harry told him.

“Really?” Draco breathed. He looked relieved and shocked and happy and disbelieving all at once. “It’s really not?”

“Of course not,” Harry said gently. “It’ll happen for you.”

Now his forehead creased in mild confusion. “It’ll happen?” he repeated

Harry smiled at him. “Yes. I didn’t think it would for me, but it did, and someday I’m sure you’ll meet someone too.”

An instant of white-hot fury crossed Draco’s face before his expressionless mask slammed down. “Someday I’ll meet someone too,” he repeated, his voice dead even. “Because I’m envious that you have someone and I don’t.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Go to lunch, Potter.”

Harry had the idea that he’d said something terribly, terribly wrong. “But…”

“Go to lunch, Potter,” Draco repeated, his voice creeping up in volume. He still hadn’t opened his eyes and Harry got the impression that he was struggling to keep from shouting. Or possibly hexing him.

So Harry went.

He took the long way down to the Atrium and found David already waiting for him.

“Hey, you got out early?” David asked, then took in the look on Harry’s face. “What’s wrong?”

Harry shook his head. “Not here,” he said.

They left the Ministry together and walked the two blocks to their favorite sandwich shop. David ordered for both of them while Harry found them a quiet table in the back corner, where he sat with his head in his hands until David came back.

“Now will you tell me what’s wrong?” David asked as he sat down across from Harry.

Harry looked up. “Draco’s angry with me, and I thought we’d fixed it but I think I just made it worse. You were right, by the way. He was jealous,” Harry sighed. He slid his fingers up

under his glasses to rub at his eyes.

“You told him? What did he say?” David leaned forward eagerly.

“He got really angry and told me to go to lunch,” Harry said.

David regarded him evenly. “Harry,” he said slowly. “What exactly did you tell him?”

Harry repeated the conversation and by the end of it David had taken off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

“Oh Harry,” he sighed. “Harry, Harry, Harry. I love you, I really do, but sometimes you are such a fucking idiot. I’m impressed that Draco didn’t hex you, because right now I want to hex you on his behalf.” He slid his glasses back into place and folded his hands on the tabletop before him. “When I said that Draco was jealous, I didn’t mean of our relationship. I meant that he was jealous of me.”

Harry blinked at him. “Of you? But he barely even met you. What would he have to be jealous about?” He paused, mind sifting through old conversations.

David rubbed a hand over his face. “Harry, are you really this thick or is it an act you put on just for me?” he asked, then sighed. “He’s jealous of me because he thinks I have you.” David stared hard at him. “He wants you,” he added slowly in a tone that strongly resembled Draco’s talking-to-a-halfwit voice.

“Me?” Harry said faintly. “But he doesn’t… He can’t… I’m…” His mind replayed a dozen half-veiled comments, how Draco was constantly finding excuses to touch him, those shy smiles that would disappear the moment Harry turned unexpectedly and caught them on Draco’s face. Draco wanted him. *Draco wanted him*. “He wants me.” Harry felt stunned. He felt like an ass. “He… All this time, he wants me.”

A heavy thud brought him back to the present. David had dropped his head against the tabletop. “Harry,” he muttered into the formica. “What am I going to do with you?”

Harry just shook his head. “I’m such an idiot. I am the hugest fucking idiot.”

And he was, wasn’t he? It seemed perfectly obvious, looking back on it. How had he missed it? All the signs were there, and he’d even caught most of them. Except he’d also talked himself out of every single one, assuming that he was reading too much into it, that he was projecting his own feelings onto Draco’s actions. That he was seeing what he wanted to see. That someone like Draco, with his perfectly coordinated clothing and his refined manners and his breathtakingly precise magical control, could ever want someone like *Harry*. Harry was awful at all the things Draco was good at, and *the world’s biggest fucking idiot* besides.

His first impulse was to run straight back to the office and tell Draco everything, but he knew Draco well enough to recognize that for the bad idea it was. Right now Draco was hurt and angry and probably feeling very, very vulnerable. One thing he’d learned as far back as Hogwarts was that Draco was always at his most dangerous when he felt vulnerable. If Harry went back now, Draco would lash out and it would escalate and then Harry would ruin any

chance he still had. He'd have to wait until the sting faded and Draco calmed down before he could approach…

Harry groaned. What they hell was wrong with him? He couldn't approach Draco about this because Kingsley would absolutely murder him if Harry started something with his prime suspect in four different deaths. It was against the rules for Auror partners to get involved with each other romantically, but Harry would probably consider breaking the rules on that under normal circumstances. But the ongoing investigation made it impossible.

Right. So, he'd just go back to the office after lunch, and… what? Act like nothing was wrong? God, Draco would hate that and it'd only make this worse. He'd apologize, that's what he'd do. He'd keep it as simple as he could and apologize for upsetting Draco, and then just let the whole thing go.

"So are you going to tell him the truth?" David asked. He'd sat up again at some point and was watching Harry in that quietly shrewd way that felt one step away from Legilimency.

"What?" Harry blinked. "The truth about what?"

"Us. He's still under the impression that we're a couple, yeah? Are you going to tell him we're not?"

"I…" Harry hadn't considered that yet, but now he ran through it quickly. "No. I mean, what good will it do?"

"Well, he seems to have feelings for you. And you obviously fancy him."

"What? How did… How could you tell?" Harry thought he'd been careful to hide his feelings about Draco.

David just smirked. "I know you," he said, and in that moment he looked so Draco-like that Harry's heart clenched. Fucking hell, Ron was probably right about Harry having a thing for Draco-lookalikes.

"Well nothing can happen," Harry sighed.

David studied him with a small frown. "Because you're partners?"

"Fuck no," Harry said. "I don't care about that. But I told you about the investigation. I'm primary on it, you know." His protests sounded half-hearted even to his own ears.

"You also told me he's innocent." David shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "And you've never been one to let a few rules stop you."

He changed the subject then, launching seamlessly into a story about his Curse-Breaking work in Greece earlier that year, and Harry let him go on uninterrupted. He tried to follow along at first, but quickly gave up on paying attention. His thoughts kept going back to Draco, back to the fact that Draco wanted him. And even though he knew that he should wait until the investigation was over before he pursued Draco, that reason felt thinner by the moment. Harry wanted Draco, and bloody hell, Draco wanted him right back.

Lunch passed in a blur, and almost before he knew it, Harry found himself standing in front of his office door. The restaurant had been crowded and it'd taken ages to get their food, so he was a little late. Harry sighed, staring at the nameplate on the door. He reached out with one finger and lightly rubbed the B in Draco's name – just for luck – then pushed the door open.

"You're late," Draco snapped at him before Harry could even move to take off his robes. "Eleven minutes."

He sighed, fingers working the buttons open. "Sorry, lunch ran long," he said as he shrugged out of his robes and hung them on their hook by the door.

Draco had hung his up as well, and Harry took that as a good sign and chanced a look at Draco. He was wearing all black today and it made him look a little severe, but Harry found he rather liked that. Draco was also wearing his glasses, which Harry took as another good sign.

"Listen, Draco," Harry began. "I want to apologize."

"I can assure you that there's nothing to apologize for," Draco said, his tone clipped and businesslike.

"No, there really is. See—"

"There's not," Draco cut him off and finally looked up. "I'm perfectly fine."

Harry sighed. He didn't need the way Draco's eyes darted away from him for just an instant to confirm the lie this time. "You can't lie to me, Draco. I just—"

"You don't know me, Potter," Draco said harshly.

"I absolutely do!" Harry insisted, and despite himself his voice had crept up in volume. "I'm just trying to say I'm sorry for—"

"And I'm saying there's nothing wrong! Will you just leave it the fuck alone?" Draco snarled at him. "Merlin, you're irritating. I'm starting to see why all your other partners have fucked off rather than deal with you."

Yes, and there was the lashing out. Harry sighed again. "I'm still sorry," he said.

Harry watched as Draco glared at him for a moment longer, then bowed his head over his paperwork and got back to it as if Harry didn't exist. And even with the ugly tone of voice, the glaring, the fact that he clearly wanted Harry to go find a bridge to jump off… even with all of that, Harry still had to fight down a wave of desire so strong it nearly pulled him under. Draco was all anger and passion and roiling emotions wrapped up in a gorgeous package of steely self-control, a study in opposites, and Harry wanted him so badly it felt like one short step away from pain.

The fact that Draco wanted him back only inflamed his desire that much more, and Harry really had no idea how he was going to deal with it. It was already hard enough to keep

himself from reaching out. Sometimes he had to curl his hands into fists, fingernails biting into his palms, to keep from touching Draco. Had to bite his tongue to keep from saying what he felt. How was he going to keep himself in check while knowing all the while that Draco wanted to be touched? That he wanted Harry to say those things?

Really, all he could do was just try to get back to where they were before. Clearly, Draco was completely unwilling to accept a spoken apology, but then he'd always known that words were a cheap promise. Draco would need actions to convince him. Harry thought back over conversations they'd had, and the loose beginnings of a plan unfurled in his mind.

And if his plan felt a little more like trying to woo Draco than the simple apology Harry told himself it was, well, he just wouldn't think about that.

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Draco stalked down the hallway after taking a small break for his afternoon cup of tea. Rather than bringing it back to his office and spending ten minutes talking to Harry about Quidditch, as usual, he'd finished his cuppa in the break room. Just as he'd done for fifth time this week, and Harry hadn't said anything about it. Draco was running a little late after his detour down to Filing to pick up the next section of customer records to work on. He'd been putting in a ton of overtime this week and already finished up the first batch, not that Harry had said anything about that either. Hadn't offered to stay with him and help. Hadn't brought him dinner or taken him back to his flat. Probably too busy with his precious David, though Harry hadn't said anything about him since lunch on Monday.

And Draco found he was both relieved and disappointed. The mere thought of Harry together with David felt like red-hot pins pricking at his heart, but at the same time Draco desperately wanted to know more. Which made no sense at all to him, something he'd pointed out to Mrs. Dodson during their whispered conversation while Harry sorted through a trunk full of lace doilies at the other end of the shop in the search for copper brooch in the shape of a unicorn. She'd only patted his hand and whispered to him, "The heart is funny like that, isn't it?" Then she'd made him tea and he hadn't even had to ask her for the ginger biscuits. Then they'd talked about hats while Harry had stared out the dusty plate glass window, idly chewing on his thumbnail and making no attempt whatsoever to join their conversation.

Draco sighed. Maybe it was the pick-me-up of his afternoon tea that made him feel a little generous, but he was able to admit that this sudden distance between them was probably (mostly) his own fault. They'd somehow gotten caught in a vicious cycle, where Draco felt hurt so he distanced himself from Harry, and Harry let himself be pushed away, which only made Draco angrier, so he pushed him further. So, yes, of course Harry stopped trying to talk to him when all Draco did was snap back. And of course he wouldn't complain when Draco gave him a break from all that unpleasantness midway through the afternoon by having his tea without him. In fact, Harry probably looked forward to it.

He reached his office and shoved the door open, moderately surprised to find Harry behind his desk and completely engrossed in his work. Usually he procrastinated sitting back down with his files until Draco prodded him about wasting time. Draco turned to his own desk, ready to throw himself back into his own work and try to pretend the man across the room from him didn't exist, but a small box sitting in the middle of his blotter caught his eye. That hadn't been there when he left.

Slowly, Draco set his Compressed stack of files aside and picked up the box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. He looked at Harry. "Are these from you?"

"Who else would they be from?" Harry asked without looking up.

Draco frowned at him. "Is this an apology?" he asked because that seemed like a very Potter-ish thing to do.

Harry shrugged and still didn't look up.

"You bought me Bertie Botts Beans as an apology?" Draco asked, and let his tone imply 'what sort of idiot are you?'

Harry sighed at his paperwork. "Why don't you open it?"

Part of Draco wanted to be difficult and pitch the stupid little box across the room, but something in Harry's tone had him unfolding the top. He stared down into it, momentarily thrown, because instead of the rainbow of colored beans he expected, these were all white. Frowning, he picked one out and popped it into his mouth, and the familiar taste of envelope glue spread over his tongue.

Draco swallowed, then said, "I didn't think they sold them by flavor?" He hadn't meant to phrase it as a question, but this little box of envelope glue beans had him off balance.

"They don't."

Draco waited for more explanation but it didn't come. If they didn't sell them by flavor, yet he clearly held a box full of envelope glue flavored beans in his hand, then…

"So, what, you picked through to get a box of envelope glue beans?" he asked, a little stunned but not really surprised because that also seemed like a very Potter-ish thing to do.

Harry finally looked up at him. "Yeah. There might be a few French vanilla ones in there, though. They sort of look the same," he said, his voice as light and casual as if picking through dozens of boxes of Bertie Bott's Beans to find enough envelope glue ones to fill a box on their own was a completely normal thing to do.

And Draco nearly laughed aloud, because it most certainly wasn't normal at all. It was ridiculous and absurd and crazy and undoubtedly the most touching and thoughtful thing anyone had ever done for him in his entire life. Draco's throat grew tight with an emotion he didn't care to examine. He ate another bean instead.

"How many boxes did you go through?" he asked when he could trust his voice again.

Harry pulled a face. “You don't even want to know.”

Draco did laugh a little at that. “You’re absolutely mental, you know,” he said.

A hesitant smile blossomed across Harry’s face, bringing a sparkle to his eyes that Draco hadn’t realized was missing. “Yeah, probably.”

Draco popped another bean into his mouth before folding the top of the little box closed again. “I can’t believe you remembered I like these.”

“Of course I do. I remember everything you told me that afternoon. Just like you remember everything I told you?” Harry’s voice went a little uncertain at the end, as if he wasn’t quite sure that Draco did.

“Of course I do,” Draco assured him.

Harry’s fading smile came back full-force. “So does this mean I’m forgiven?”

“As if I could stay upset with someone who spent hours picking through beans for me,” Draco said, using a haughty tone to hide the overwhelming tangle of emotion currently pressing at his lungs. “But I hope you’re aware this sets quite a precedent for the next time you need to apologize to me.”

Harry laughed. “I think I can handle that.” He hesitated, shuffling some papers around his desk, then glanced up at Draco. “I hope this means you’ll come out with us tonight. I’d really like it if you did.”

In truth, Draco had decided earlier that wild thestrals couldn’t drag him anywhere near the pub tonight, but Harry looked so hopeful, and the thing with the beans, well, how could Draco say no?

****

Despite the fact that Draco had agreed to come to pub night, Harry still found himself relieved when he walked through the door. He’d been a little worried that Draco would revert to his standoffishness after they’d left work and might change his mind about coming tonight. Draco stopped at the bar for a drink and downed it in one smooth gulp before he made his way over to their table. Ron and Hermione both got polite greetings, and Draco’s eyes swept over David as if he didn’t even exist. He nodded to Harry, and moved off again after that, getting himself another drink from the bar and sipping that as he made the rounds, exchanging polite hellos with other Aurors for a little while before he retreated to a stool at the far end of the bar and sat by himself and began a valiant one-man attempt at making the bartender run dry of whisky.

Harry sighed. So much for getting back to normal.

Conversation flowed around him, but Harry had a hard time keeping up with it. His thoughts and his eyes kept straying back to Draco at the bar. He wanted so badly to go over there and… then what? The fact that he couldn't finish that sentence was the only thing that kept him in his seat.

An elbow nudging at his ribs broke him out of his thoughts. Harry looked up to find David watching him, clearly waiting for some sort of response.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said," David repeated. "I've got an early Portkey tomorrow so I think I'm going to call it a night."

Harry glanced at the clock. It was barely half past nine, but he didn't much feel like staying either, not with Draco avoiding him like this. With David gone, Harry thought that maybe they could start to patch things up on Monday. "Sure, just let me say my goodbyes," he said, standing.

"Oh no," David told him. "You're going to stay here, but come outside and say goodbye to me properly." He looped his arm through Harry's and tugged him toward the door.

The flurry of motion at their table had caught Draco's attention, and his eyes followed them out of the pub, his face folding into a scowl as Harry looked back at him and their eyes met. Draco held his gaze until the door shut behind Harry, cutting him off. Outside, the crisp night air and silence hit him like a slap to the face. He sighed and looked at David, and had no idea what to say.

"You need to tell him," David said.

Harry rubbed at his forehead. "Oh, not this again," he muttered. "Look, I really can't."

"You've made a lot of excuses, I'll give you that," David said.

"He's my partner," Harry said.

David studied his fingernails with exaggerated casualness. "You already said that doesn't matter to you."

Harry shoved a hand through his hair. "In case you've forgotten, I'm investigating him!"

"You said he's innocent," David said. "I think you're afraid."

That was so ridiculous that for a moment Harry couldn't even find words. "Afraid?" he repeated. "I'm not afraid, that doesn't even make sense!"

"It makes perfect sense," David said. "You're already in deep with him, and I think you're afraid of taking that step and then have it not work out."

"I'm not in deep with him." Even as he said it, Harry wasn't sure why he bothered to disagree. This was Draco. Of course Harry was in deep with him. He always had been, in one

way or another.

“Oh Harry, don’t even start that,” David sighed. “I watched you spend three nights sorting through Bertie Bott’s Beans for him. There’s no denying you’ve got it bad.”

“Not *that* bad,” Harry muttered.

David raised an eyebrow. “One hundred and fifty-seven boxes beg to differ.”

“You counted?” Harry asked, then sighed. “Right. Of course you counted.”

David snorted. “Can you blame me?”

Harry didn’t answer, because of course he couldn’t. Sorting through one hundred and fifty-seven boxes of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans was absolutely mental. And totally, completely, absolutely worth it to see the look on Draco’s face. Harry would gladly sort through a thousand boxes if that’s what it took to see that expression again. And to know that he was the one to make Draco that happy…

Well. Maybe he did have it that bad after all.

And maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

Fuck it. Draco made him happy, and after all the shit he’d been through, after everything he’d done for everyone else, didn’t Harry deserve that? And Draco. He looked so miserable tonight, sitting alone at the bar and working his way through glass after glass of spirits. Didn’t he deserve to be happy too? He’d been through just as much shit as Harry had, and worse than Harry, had spent the years after the war isolated by the poor choices his parents had made for him. Harry thought again of the look on Draco’s face when he saw all the envelope glue beans and figured out what Harry had done, so tenuously radiant that it broke Harry’s heart a little. He wanted Draco to look like that all the time, and he’d already shown he could do it. Didn’t they both deserve that?

“I’ll put up a few silencing charms so I don’t wake you when I leave,” David said, interrupting Harry’s thoughts.

“So,” Harry said. “This is goodbye?”

“This is goodbye,” David said, and hugged him back when Harry threw his arms around him. He laughed. “I’ll miss you too.”

“I’ll still expect you to write me,” Harry said, drawing away. He nudged his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “I want to hear all about Asia.”

“And I want to hear all about your Auror adventures,” he said, and grinned. “And all about Draco.”

Harry had barely made the decision five seconds ago. How had David known? “What? How did you…?”

David laughed again. “I know that look in your eyes. Now go in there and get him.”

Harry watched as David turned away and glanced up and down the street before Disapparating on the spot. He stood on the dark street for a few moments longer, taking advantage of the near-silence to firmly close this chapter of his life and turn to a fresh page. Then he climbed the three steps, pulled open the door, and stepped into the noise and warmth of the pub.

Draco was still sitting exactly where Harry had left him, forearms propped on the bar, hunched over and staring morosely into his tumbler of whisky. Harry nodded to Ron and Hermione before he made his way across the room and slid onto the empty stool beside Draco, who didn’t look up.

“Hey,” Harry said, leaning forward a bit to try and catch his eye.

Draco’s head jerked up. “Harry? What’re you doin’ here?” he slurred. His eyes fixed on Harry but didn’t quite focus. “Thought you left.”

“Okay, wow. I’m just going to take this because you *clearly* don’t need any more,” Harry said as he picked up Draco’s drink. He swallowed it in one gulp, the whisky burning a path down his throat to pool in his belly, and a pleasant warmth spread through him a few seconds later.

Draco blinked muzzily at him. He was beginning to list alarmingly to one side, and Harry reached over and gave him a little push in the other direction before he could topple off his stool. Very slowly and very deliberately, Draco reached out and poked his finger at Harry’s bicep.

“You’re here,” he said.

“I am,” Harry agreed, not quite sure what to make of a completely sozzled Draco. It was either terribly amusing or terribly sad, and Harry wasn’t entirely sure which.

Draco poked him again. “Thought you’d gone off with your boyfriend.”

Even though this was what he’d come back in here intending to tell Draco, his stomach gave a nervous flutter. “David’s not my boyfriend.”

Draco squinted at him. “But you’re shagging him?” He picked up his glass, saw that it was empty, and put it back down. He missed the bar, and only Harry’s Seeker-quick reflexes saved it from shattering on the floor.

“I’m not shagging him,” Harry said, putting the glass down well away from Draco. “I was, but not anymore. Not since October. He’s got another boyfriend now, and only came back to break things off with me properly. Which was nice of him but he really didn’t need to. I mean, we hadn’t seen each other in half a year. It’s been over for a while, I think, we’d just never made it official. But now it is. Officially over, I mean.” Harry became aware he was rambling when Draco stared at him like he’d started speaking Gobbledygook.

Slowly, Draco blinked and swayed on his stool. “Sobriety Charm,” he finally said. “I need it.”

For a moment, Harry could only stare at him. “I don’t think…”

“Sobriety Charm,” Draco repeated loudly. “I’m as drunk as a boiled owl and in no shape to cast, but if you don’t do it I swear I’ll try anyhow. And then we’ll have to go to St. Mungo’s.” He leaned closer to Harry too quickly and nearly fell off his stool. “I don’t wanna go to St. Mungo’s.”

“Outside, then,” Harry said as he stood, because casting under the influence was the single biggest cause of magic gone awry and Draco was probably pickled enough to make good on his threat out of sheer mulishness. “No witnesses, that way.”

He helped Draco clamber down off his stool and slung one of Draco’s arms over his shoulder. Draco seemed to have some amount of trouble getting his feet to work properly, and Harry had to half-drag him across the bar. Outside, he maneuvered Draco two buildings down the block where a gap between a grocer’s and an apartment building left a narrow passage. He dragged Draco inside and propped him up against the brick wall of the grocer’s before he cast a Muffliato and a Notice-Me-Not on the entrance. When he turned back he found that Draco had sat down. Harry leveled his wand at him and hesitated.

“Just do it, Potter,” he snarled, his irritation tempered somewhat by the slurring and the way his eyes wouldn’t quite focus.

Harry cast. Instantly, Draco doubled over and let out a high moan of pain through clenched teeth as the spell burned off all the alcohol in his blood and in his belly. All Aurors knew this particular spell, but only used it in the worst cases of Drunk and Disorderly. It was complicated to cast and painful to endure, and in most cases, waiting for someone to sober up naturally and administering a hangover potion was so much kinder.

It took several long minutes before Draco stopped trembling and moaning, but eventually he looked up at Harry and scrubbed a steady hand through his hair. “That was unpleasant,” he said in what was probably the biggest understatement Harry had ever heard.

Harry reached out a hand and pulled Draco to his feet. “At least you didn’t sick up,” he said. That happened sometimes.

“Thank Merlin for small favors,” he murmured.

“Why did you want me to do it? The Sobriety Charm, I mean. It’s awful,” Harry said.

“I thought that you… That I…” Draco began, then shook his head. “I was drunk. I think I was imagining things.”

Harry had a fair idea of what Draco thought he’d imagined and wanted to tell him he wasn’t imagining things at all, but Harry also didn’t want to do this here in a narrow, dingy alleyway. “Come on,” he said instead. “Walk with me?”

They walked down the street in silence. Several times Draco inhaled like he was going to say something, but he only held his breath for long moments before releasing it on a sigh. They came to their street corner and stopped.

“You know,” Harry said when Draco reluctantly turned to face him. “I’ve wanted to kiss you on this corner ever since that first pub night you came to.”

Draco looked like Harry had just whacked him over the head. “I’ve wanted you to,” he said, apparently too stunned to do anything but answer honestly.

“But I’m not going to,” Harry went on. “Because I think first kisses should always be goodnight kisses. And I’m not ready to say goodnight to you. It’s early yet. Have dinner with me?”

Draco still looked stunned and off-kilter, but a slow smile curved his lips. “Like a date?” he asked.

“Exactly like a date,” Harry said with an answering smile.

“Indian?” Draco asked hopefully.

And Harry laughed. “Absolutely.”

****

Despite the nerves he’d felt at the beginning, their date had felt remarkably like every other meal he’d shared with Harry so far. By the time the waiter had delivered glasses of water to the table, Draco’s nerves had all but vanished because this was just Harry. They spoke easily about work and Quidditch and all the other things they normally talked about, and Harry convinced Draco to try something called lamb shahajahani that looked remarkably like yellow-orange spew but tasted brilliant, and Harry kept trying to steal bites of lamb from Draco’s plate and laughed when Draco couldn’t retaliate because Harry was a madman and apparently dead set on burning all feeling from his tongue because he’d ordered *an eight*, the nutter, and Draco had felt his sinuses open up from across the table the moment the waiter had delivered Harry’s meal and he wanted nothing at all to do with *that*, thankyouverymuch.

They kept talking after their plates were cleared and the check had been paid and the waiter had quit refilling their water glasses and everyone else had left the restaurant. It wasn’t until the waiter had very pointedly begun to sweep the floor just beside their table that Harry laughed and said they’d better go.

Back out in the clear night, Harry cast a warming charm over them both and asked Draco if he could walk him home.

“I’m not a girl, Potter,” he said. “I’m perfectly capable of seeing myself home.”

“I know that,” Harry said with an endearingly crooked smile. “But this way the date isn’t over yet.”

“I could walk you home,” Draco countered.

Harry grinned. “You live farther away than I do, so the date will last longer if I walk you.” He paused and tapped his finger to his temple. “See, I think about these things.”

And Draco couldn’t argue with that, so Harry walked him home.

The long walk seemed to pass by in an instant, and almost before he knew what he was doing, Draco found himself climbing the steps to his front door with Harry close behind.

“So,” he said as the nerves came rushing back. “I suppose this is goodnight.” It didn’t have to be, he thought, he could ask Harry to come inside, he could…

“I suppose this is,” Harry said and slid his arms around Draco and tipped his face up just the slightest bit.

All rational thought fled and Draco found himself helpless to do anything other than tilt his chin down a fraction as his hands found Harry’s waist, and then Harry’s lips met his and oh sweet Merlin it was just like he’d imagined, except it was also so much better than he’d ever thought a kiss could be. Harry’s lips were warm and soft and he explored the shape of Draco’s mouth with slow nibbling kisses that made Draco’s knees go weak. Harry made a soft moaning sound as his arms tightened around Draco and he nipped lightly at Draco’s bottom lip, and Draco’s fingers curled into the soft fabric of Harry’s pocket shirt. And even though Draco hadn’t had many kisses to compare this one to, he was still certain that he’d never have one that was better than this.

All too soon, Harry pulled away just far enough to whisper, “Goodnight, Draco,” against his lips before he took a step back.

“Harry,” Draco began, but Harry shushed him by leaning in and stealing another gentle kiss.

“Goodnight, Draco,” he repeated, smiling, and started down the steps.

“Goodnight, Harry,” Draco said, and Harry turned that brilliant smile on him for just an instant as he reached the sidewalk.

Draco lingered on his front stoop, watching Harry until he disappeared from sight. His bottom lip still tingled from where Harry’s lips had skimmed it and he couldn’t keep from smiling. He’d just had a date, and Harry had just kissed him. Draco wanted him, and Harry wanted him back, and now Draco had him.

Still not quite able to believe that tonight had really happened, Draco let himself into his end terrace and shut the door behind him. He paused for a moment to brush his fingertips over his bottom lip where Harry’s teeth had grazed it, then shook his head at his own ridiculousness. So Harry Potter had kissed him. So what? He’d probably do it again. And again and again and again, if Draco had anything to say about it.

Smiling to himself, Draco made his way up to his bedroom and crossed the room to his bureau, and picked up his bottle cap from where he'd tossed it aside. He'd stopped carrying it around with him this week, but hadn't been able to bring himself to throw it away. He rubbed his thumb over the smooth top of it, then slipped it back into his pocket where it belonged.

****

Harry sighed in that disgustingly contented way he'd caught himself doing all weekend and hid another smile by taking a sip of Mrs. Weasley's delicious homemade lemonade. He'd taken himself off to the back porch of the Burrow because it had gotten increasingly difficult to hide his mooning with every hour that crept by, because every hour that passed brought Monday just a little bit closer, and on Monday he'd see Draco again.

He sighed again as his mind drifted back to Friday night at Draco's house, and how right that kiss had felt. How perfectly Draco's mouth had fit against his own, Draco's lips surprisingly pliant and submissive beneath Harry's. How he'd let Harry take control, and the wonderfully dazed look in his eyes when Harry had pulled away. He'd been sure that Draco was going to ask him to come in, and it had been a struggle to walk away from that. If he'd actually let Draco get the words out, he wasn't sure he could have said no.

Because even though the kiss they'd shared hadn't even been proper snogging, it had still been more than enough to heat Harry's blood, leaving him breathless and half-hard. Harry didn't doubt for an instant that if he'd gone inside with Draco, they'd have ended up shagging and it would have been *brilliant*. But Harry hadn't wanted that just yet. It was silly, he admitted, but he had wanted their date to end with that sweet, chaste kiss. Everything about their interactions so far had been anything but. They'd always been violent, hard and fast and *passionate*, yes, but in an angry and unrestrained and vicious sort of way. Things would always be like that between them to some extent, because they were still Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, and 'sweet' wasn't something they would apply to many of their interactions. But now that they were in a relationship, it was important to Harry that he know they were at least capable of it, if they really tried.

Also, he liked the idea of having a first date story that didn't end with 'And then I took him upstairs and shagged him rotten,' to tell their children some day.

They'd definitely have children, Harry thought. Not any time soon, of course, but way down the road when they'd been together for years and years and really gotten settled, they'd find a surrogate and start a family. They ought to have three, one each to continue the Potter, Black, and Malfoy lines, and Harry would let Draco name them all after constellations. Idly, Harry thought back to Astronomy lessons at Hogwarts and mentally sorted through star charts for names he wouldn't mind so much. That was a hill he'd be willing to die on, because *god* there were some horrible ones up in the branches of the Black family tree.

It was completely ridiculous. It was all sorts of putting the cart before the horse and counting unhatched chickens and more, but Harry didn't care. He knew in the back of his mind that

reality wouldn't even come close to measuring up to the foolish daydreams he was currently indulging in. He and Draco would undoubtedly be messy and complicated and of course they'd argue about everything. When he walked into work and saw Draco on Monday morning, that would make it *real*. But for now it was still all possibility, all brilliant and shining and perfect.

And so Harry was indulging in a little foolishness. He was utterly smitten and determined to enjoy every second of it before reality got in the way.

He sighed again.

"There you are," Ron said from behind him. "We'd wondered where you'd gone."

"Just out here," Harry said. He inhaled a great big deep lungful of crisp spring air. "It's a lovely day, don't you think?"

Ron leaned against the railing beside him. "Did David leave?" he asked.

Harry glanced over at his friend, surprised. "Of course he did. He told you on Friday."

"Ah. Just wondering," Ron said. "You're in a really good mood today. I thought maybe he'd ended up staying."

Harry laughed softly. "No, he's certainly gone."

"Ah," Ron said again. "What's got you in a good mood, then? Not that I don't love seeing my best mate this happy, it's just a little strange that it happens right after your boyfriend leaves you for another man."

Harry thought of his boyfriend – was that what they were? They hadn't really discussed it – and couldn't hide a smile. "I guess I'm just glad that things are finally settled, you know? One way or another, it's just nice to have it settled."

"Well I'm glad you're taking it so well," Ron said, then clapped a hand to Harry's shoulder. "Come on. Mum sent me out here to fetch you. She's serving up dessert. She made your favorite, you know."

And here he'd thought his day couldn't get any better. Still smiling, Harry followed his friend back into the house.

****

Even his father's blatant hints about marriage and heirs and proper jobs befitting the heir of the Malfoy fortune couldn't put a dent in Draco's good spirits. Draco had only smiled and nodded and made small noncommittal noises, which had the entirely unexpected benefit of driving Lucius half-mad with frustration. He'd gone storming off to his study as soon as the

house elves had cleared away the last of the plates, and now Draco and Narcissa were taking a leisurely stroll through the gardens.

They'd walked along in comfortable silence, listening to the trilling of birds and the soft crunch of gravel underfoot. Draco was making an effort to keep his mind off Harry and failing miserably, so it startled him a little when his mother said, apropos of nothing, "You're seeing someone."

Draco missed a step. "I…" He paused. He'd started to deny it, but his mother had always been able to tell when he lied. He had no idea how she did it. "How did you know?"

"I'm your mother, Draco. I can tell these things," she said with a gentle smile, then nudged him playfully with an elbow. "You're practically glowing with happiness, and I'm not so old that I don't remember what that look means." She smiled at him. "And you didn't goad your father even once this afternoon."

Draco hid a smile of his own. "Oh."

"Well?" Narcissa prompted. "Are you going to tell me who she is?"

"I'd rather not," Draco said, avoiding the fact that she wasn't a she at all. "It's still quite new. We only had our first date on Friday, and I'd like to give it a bit more time before, well. It's rather complicated."

"Say no more," Narcissa told him. "I'm just so happy that you've found someone. I'd love to meet her as soon as you're ready."

"Thanks, Mum. And… could you not say anything to Father?" It would keep Lucius from harping on about continuing the bloodline for a bit, but it would make the fallout just that more explosive when he finally told his parents that it was Harry.

Narcissa took his hand in hers and gave it a pat. "Absolutely. As soon as you're ready."

Draco looked down at her radiant face. She'd be disappointed once she found out who he was seeing, but she'd quickly come around, he thought, when she saw how happy Harry made him. "Thanks Mum," he said again.

They continued walking, and Draco thought of Harry, and of tomorrow.

Chapter 10

Harry strolled into his office on Monday morning with a smile on his face and a spring in his step. As usual he found Draco already parked behind his desk, cup of tea at his elbow, glasses perched on his nose, and an enormous stack of files spread out on the desk before him.

“Good morning,” Harry said brightly.

“You’re late,” Draco replied without looking up. “Seven minutes.”

Harry faltered, his good mood fizzling. Draco sounded exactly the same as he always did, if not a touch drier, but how could he sound the same when everything between them was different now?

“Draco…” he began.

Draco snapped his folder shut and stood. “I’m going down to Communications to see if we’ve been assigned any cases for the day.”

“Oh. Um, all right,” Harry said, shifting aside as Draco took his robes from the door and dressed quickly. Draco still wouldn’t meet his eyes and when Harry reached for him, Draco jerked away and left the room before he’d even finished doing up his buttons.

Feeling confused and a little hurt, Harry wandered behind his desk and waited for Draco to return.

He did, a few minutes later. “Nothing,” he said.

“Look,” Harry told him. “I think we need to talk about—“

“The only thing we need to talk about is your progress with your training,” Draco cut him off, his tone brisk and businesslike. “You’re not improving with the cursed paperweights as quickly as I thought you would, so I thought we’d spend this morning at the safe house, brushing up on your skills there, and you can keep practicing on the paperweights this afternoon.” He opened the door and swept out into the hall before Harry could respond.

Draco continued to treat Harry with infuriating professionalism as they worked their way through the safe house, and all the while Harry’s confusion mounted, mingling with hurt. Had Draco changed his mind? Had Friday not meant anything to him? Did he not care? The more he fixated on it, the angrier he became until finally he snapped.

“Why are you doing this to me?” he demanded.

Draco frowned at him. “What are you on about?”

“This!” Harry exclaimed and flung out a hand between them. “How you’re treating me!”

“I don’t see a problem, I’m afraid. I’m treating you exactly the same as I always have,” Draco said, his frown deepening.

“And that’s the problem! Because everything’s not the same with us. We’re…” He trailed off briefly, because they hadn’t really discussed what they were to each other now. “I mean, Friday. We went out, and you let me kiss you. I thought you liked me.”

Draco’s eyes had gone wide. “Of course I do.”

“Well you’ve got a fucking awful way of showing it,” Harry snapped. “Stupid me, assuming you’d acknowledge it.”

“That’s exactly the problem,” Draco snapped back, matching Harry’s anger, making the leap from zero to as-pissed-off-as-Potter in the blink of an eye. He’d always been good at that. “In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re *at work*. Do you have any idea how many rules we’re breaking? Seventeen, Potter. There are seventeen different regulations that forbid *exactly* what we’re doing. You might get off easy, they couldn’t just fire their precious Saint Potter. But me? This would be exactly the excuse they’re waiting for to get rid of me.”

“I’m not asking you to snog me in the Atrium or send out pamphlets about it! I just can’t stand you holding me at arm’s length our own office!” Harry told him, his voice creeping up in volume.

“I don’t have a choice *but* to hold you at arm’s length!” Draco shouted. “You don’t get it, do you? I need to keep it separate. I need to keep Harry my Auror partner and Harry my boyfriend as separate people. I’m afraid that if I blur that line even the slightest bit I’ll slip up, because I’m so gone over you it’s pathetic!”

That brought Harry up short. “Wait, what? You’re pushing me away because you like me so much?”

“Yes!” huffed Draco. He folded his arms over his chest, and Harry couldn’t help grinning at him because the whole thing suddenly seemed absurd.

“Oh, Draco. I’d really like to kiss you now,” Harry said, still smiling.

Draco glared at him. “I’d really like that too.”

“But I won’t.”

“Because I’d hex you if you did,” Draco said.

“You could have told me, you know,” Harry said. “I was worried you’d changed your mind about me. About us.”

The scowl on Draco’s face melted away. “I… I didn’t think of that. I should have.” He sighed. “I’m going to be shit at this. The closest I’ve had to a relationship was with Pansy back at Hogwarts. I only dated her to keep anyone from figuring out I liked boys, and she put up with me being rubbish at it because I bought her things.”

“It’s fine. It’ll take a lot more than this to put me off you,” Harry said as he turned back to the cursed windowsill. “So. Seventeen different regulations?”

Beside him, Draco leaned close enough that his shoulder brushed against Harry’s, and Harry took that small contact for the apology it was. “More like sixteen, in my opinion. Number twelve is essentially the same as number seven, just reworded some. You’re about to set that off, you know.”

Harry quickly dropped the threads of magic he was tugging at. “Thanks. I hate these things. I don’t know why you like setting Concussive Curses so much.”

A slight smirk played across Draco’s mouth. “I liked making you deaf because I could tell you all sorts of things. Like what lovely eyes you have. Or how much I want to touch your hair.”

For a second Harry could only stare at him. “Seriously?” he demanded. “Seriously? You deafened me multiple times just so you could tell me you want to touch my hair?”

“Weren’t you listening, Potter? I also said I liked your eyes,” Draco said with a small teasing smile, and Harry couldn’t stay mad at him. “And in my defense, it’s very touchable.”

Harry rolled his ‘lovely’ eyes. “You’ve always told me it looks like a rat’s nest.”

“A very touchable rat’s nest,” Draco said with a shrug.

Harry sighed. “You’re something else, you know that?” He sighed again. “Come over tonight. I’ll make you dinner and you can touch my hair all you want.”

Draco grinned at him. “It’s a date,” he said, then cleared his throat and in an instant Auror Malfoy had replaced Draco. “Now. Try the window again. And this time try to unravel it from here.” He pointed with his wand, and Harry did as he was told.

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By Tuesday, Draco had managed to relax around Harry at work. It hadn’t taken him as long as he’d feared it would to get his mind to accept that Work Harry and Boyfriend Harry needed to be treated differently, but the urge to push Harry onto their horrifically uncomfortable office sofa and snog him senseless had mostly abated. It helped that they’d gone back to Harry’s flat after work on Monday night and had dinner together, and then Harry had let Draco push him back onto the much more comfortable sofa in his living room and snog him senseless there instead.

They hadn’t gone beyond kissing yet, but Harry seemed inclined to take things a little slow, and Draco was more than happy to thoroughly enjoy each step they took before they finally fell into bed together. He hadn’t sorted into Slytherin for nothing, after all. He knew how a longer build-up could make the reward that much more satisfying.

Just then, Harry burst into their office in a flurry of red robes. “We’ve got a case!” he exclaimed, his whole face alight. “A real honest-to-god track down the Dark Wizard and bring him in to face justice sort of case! There might even be dueling!” He paused to heave a gusty sigh. “*God* I hope there’s dueling.”

Draco found it difficult to remain professional with Harry bouncing around like an overexcited child on Christmas morning, but he managed. “What’s happened?” he asked as he tossed on his robes and buttoned them up.

“Some arsehole showed up at a Muggle shopping plaza and started throwing curses around,” Harry said as they strode down the hall. “He ran when the Aurors showed up and they tracked him down to an abandoned estate. One of the Lestrange’s I think. He’s in there now. They’ve got the place locked down, but they can’t go in. It’s a safe house, you see, trapped to hell and back just like all the others. First man who tried to go in after him touched the doorknob and set off a Bonegrinder Curse. They barely got him to St. Mungo’s in time, I heard.”

“I’ve told them time and again, never touch the doors,” Draco murmured, lost in thought because this whole thing didn’t quite add up. “You said it’s a Lestrange estate?”

“Um, yeah,” Harry said with a frown. “Rabastan, I think.”

“Something’s off about this,” Draco said. He began ticking off points on his fingers. “First off, none of the safe houses were set up on properties that could be traced back to any Death Eater. Second, there aren’t any known Death Eaters left unaccounted for who would know about safe houses or how to set them up, and this would’ve had to have been set up post-war because the Ministry investigated all properties of known Death Eaters before the trials. Third, where are the wards? Auror Gormless shouldn’t have even been able to set foot on the property, much less reach the door if the place were warded properly. And fourth—“

“You think it’s a trap?” Harry asked, and didn’t wait for an answer. “I guess it is a little hinky that someone would start cursing Muggles so publicly then run straight back to hole up in a house belonging to a convicted Death Eater.” He glanced at Draco, all cheerfulness gone from his features, replaced by wary determination. “What do we do?”

“We do our jobs,” Draco said. “We go in there with a hell of a lot of back-up and we catch the bastard. I’m good at what I do, and we’re expecting a trap. We’ll be careful, and as long as you do what I tell you, we should be fine.” He leveled a pointed stare at Harry. “You will do exactly what I say. I mean that.”

“Right,” Harry said with a nod. “I saw Ron’s fingers. You’re definitely the expert.”

Minutes later, they Apparated to the Lestrange estate, a sprawling manor sitting in the middle of an enormous weed-choked yard. Draco could feel the hum and crackle of standard Auror wards around the building, and a dozen Aurors stood waiting by the front path. Most of them glared at Draco, but they all seemed relieved to have Harry here.

Draco took a deep breath to center himself, put his chin up, and asked, “Is the suspect still inside?”

“He’s still in there, all right,” one of the older Aurors said, stepping forward. He addressed Harry without so much as glancing at Draco. “No sign of activity, though.”

“Right,” Draco said, ignoring the lack of eye contact. “Here’s the plan.”

“What do you think, Auror Potter?” the other Auror asked, deliberately raising his voice and speaking over Draco.

“I think you really ought to listen to Auror Malfoy,” Harry said mildly. “He’s the expert in this, not me.”

Draco could have kissed him then and there. Instead he cleared his throat and said, “As I was saying, Auror Potter and I have analyzed this situation and come to the conclusion that it is likely a trap. There’s no telling what we will find beyond those doors, so we will proceed with extreme caution. Auror Potter and I will proceed first, and the rest of you will follow behind us. You will step only where we step. You will not touch anything. The curses in here were set by people who had no qualms about inflicting severe and agonizing damage, as one of our ranks learned today.” Most of the Aurors were nodding along but a few still looked unconvinced. Probably because he was a Malfoy and why should they trust anything he said? “Do we all remember Bellatrix Lestrange?” he asked, and paused dramatically. “Setting up safe houses was her *favorite*. She felt it gave her a creative outlet.”

Ah, there were the appropriately apprehensive expressions on the faces of his audience. As always, that line never failed to impress.

“I will light up a safe path through the house. You will stay on the path. If you step off the path, I cannot guarantee your continued well-being. Am I understood?” He let his gaze sweep over the Aurors assembled before him. “Wonderful. Let’s begin.”

Draco strode up to the front door, casting detection spells on the porch as he went. Even though Auror Gormless had made it safely to the doorknob, Draco would take no chances here. He found the door layered with a nasty variety of hexes and curses, and he frowned. Every safe house he’d encountered so far had only had a few, maybe a half dozen at most, but these were wallpapered on there so thick and intricate that…

It hit him like a Stunner to the head. Whoever had set this had ensured that Draco would be called in to deal with it. They wanted him here.

Draco didn’t realize he’d frozen until Harry gently brushed a finger against his elbow. “Is something wrong?”

Draco shook his head. “It’s all completely wrong. It’s overkill. There’s so many curses on here it’s… That Auror is bloody lucky all he set off was a Bonegrinder Curse. Look here…” Draco cast a detection spell that made the door light up like a bloody Christmas tree. “The Sweating Blood Curse. Entrail Expelling, Sponge Knees, Mind Eater, ugh, that one’s nasty. Ooh, an Inverted Flagrante, that’s an unusual one. Set that one off and it’ll broil you from the inside out. And oh, how lovely, there’s an Accelerating Charm tied to it so it’ll all be over in about two minutes flat.”

“That’s not enough time to get to St. Mungo’s,” Harry said, his voice low and somber.

“I rather suspect that’s the point,” Draco replied. “Now hush, and take a step back if you will? Stripping these off one by one will take too long, but there’s a bit of a shortcut I can use.”

“Shortcut?” Harry asked, but he moved back.

“Yes. The same spell that will light up the safe path should get me safely through the door.” Draco raised his wand and leveled it at the doorknob.

“Should?” Harry repeated.

“Yes,” Draco said. “If you wouldn’t mind moving back a little more? Either the door will open, or I’m about to set all of these off at once.”

Harry darted forward, grabbed his wrist and wrenched it down. “Are you mad?” he demanded. “That’s too big of a risk, you can’t…”

“Harry,” Draco said gently, tugging his wrist free. “It’s a calculated risk. Whoever did this did it all to lure me out. That’s the point of all these. I’m the only one who can undo them all. They want me here. They want me inside. This will work.”

For a long moment, Harry only watched him solemnly. Then he nodded once and stepped back. Turning back to the door, Draco raised his wand again. Despite his reassurances to Harry, he was only about ninety-five percent sure he could get in, because if he were trying to kill someone, this was how he’d do it. Leave a trail of breadcrumbs leading into the house, and end it all before they even got inside. But he knew Death Eaters and their ridiculous flair for the dramatic. They never took the practical option. He exhaled slowly, and cast.

The door clicked and swung open, and a glowing blue path flickered into being along the floorboards.

Draco turned to the Aurors. “Do not touch the door, the doorjamb, or the threshold. Above all, do not leave the path.”

He nodded to Harry, and stepped into the house. The path led down the hall, and Draco followed it, casting a constant stream of detection spells as he went. He spared the barest glance to the rest of the house, just enough to glean the impression of *dark* and *dusty* and *abandoned* before he returned his full attention to the path and his detection charms, and made his slow and cautious way along the hall, past the main staircase, and to a discreet doorway tucked away near the back of the house.

Draco paused at the top of the set of steep stone steps and stared down. He knew exactly what this led to. Safely away from the main residence, surrounded on all sides by thick stone walls, buried deep so all illegal spells would be muffled beneath a protective layer of dirt, these rooms made the perfect place to practice Dark Magic. All properly Dark wizarding families had one; there was one at the Manor just like it. It had been a favorite meeting place

of the Dark Lord, conveniently located just a short walk from the Dungeons. Draco hadn't been down there since the war.

Slowly, he crept down the stairs, along a dim hall, and up to the door at the end of it. Both the simpler and more complex unlocking charms he cast at it did nothing. He could probably pick it apart, given enough time, but it would be far quicker to open it using the proper key for this particular lock. He began to unbutton his robes.

"What are you doing?" Harry whispered.

"I need the Mark to open this," he murmured back, letting his robes fall to the floor. Merlin, he hoped that the dim light of the hall would hide his scarring.

He needn't have worried.

"Back up!" Harry said to the Aurors crowding behind them. "This might be dangerous."

"Thank you," Draco murmured as he pushed up his shirtsleeve.

As always, a shiver of revulsion ran through him at the sight of the ugly scarring and the uglier Mark just below. He pressed the tip of his wand to the rippled scar tissue of his forearm, just atop the skull, and softly said, "Morsmordre."

He heard several Aurors suck in hissing breaths as that familiar skull-and-snake motif appeared on the door in glowing acid-green before fading slowly as the door swung open. Absolutely fucking *perfect*. There was no way this wouldn't be the hottest piece of Ministry gossip by tomorrow morning. He shook his sleeve back down over his forearm.

As expected, the wide room was all stone, with high vaulted ceilings and elaborate carvings along the walls. Torches flickered from wrought iron sconces that lined the walls every few feet, and it was completely empty. Slowly, Draco edged forward with Harry at his side.

There was a sudden flash of movement in the far corner as a masked wizard burst out of the inconspicuous doorway at the rear of the room and cast at them. Harry and Draco both dived out of the way, and the spell hit its target. The door slammed shut behind them, cutting them off from the rest of the Aurors.

It looked like Harry would get his duel after all.

They both came up casting, Harry moving left while Draco went right, presenting two targets to the wizard and forcing him to divide his attention. Most of their spells deflected off the Shield Charms he'd layered around himself, but that wouldn't hold for long. Harry and Draco had moved farther apart by now, Harry along the left wall while Draco had lingered nearer the door, intending to use his Mark to open it again as soon as he could find an opening to do so.

Splitting up in a duel like this was a textbook move, one Draco realized too late the wizard had counted on them to do.

Because Draco wasn't the target after all.

The wizard pointed his wand at Harry and bellowed a spell that Draco had hoped to never hear again in his life. A great rushing, billowing noise was their only warning before gouts of flame gushed from his wand, leaping and twisting as they formed a fiery menagerie, stallions and eagles and serpents and dragons, surrounding Harry and closing in fast. The wizard ducked into a narrow doorway at the back of the room, and a flaming elephant came barreling out a split second later, blocking them from giving chase.

For a moment, Draco couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't even think as panic swallowed his mind whole. Harry was casting frantically, screaming spell after useless spell as the flames closed in. Some of those fiery monsters had started for Draco as the blaze spread, and he had a choice.

The door was right behind him. He could open it. He could escape.

If he left, Harry would die.

For an instant, Draco was seventeen again, terrified and trapped on a teetering stack of furniture as the Fiendfyre leapt and raged around him, certain that this was the end. And then Harry had swept down from above, looking grim and determined and every inch the Savior, and had taken his hand and saved his life.

This wasn't a choice at all.

Draco sprinted toward the flames and cast the strongest Shield Charm he could as he threw himself into a narrow gap between a twisting serpent and a leaping panther. The charm wouldn't hold for long against the Fiendfyre, but Draco didn't need it to. He felt it crumbling around him as the serpent struck, and for an instant all there was around him was heat and flame and light and blinding terror, and then a spell cast from somewhere ahead of him knocked the serpent back where it dissolved into a shower of sparks before reforming into a chimaera, and there was Harry. Draco's Shield Charm fell just as he broke through, and the panther swiped at him with flaming claws, missing by millimeters.

They pressed themselves back against the wall as the flaming animals closed in.

"Oh my god, Draco," Harry said. He was still casting furiously, his spells doing little more than buying them a few more seconds at a time. He was scared, his eyes wide and frightened behind glasses that reflected the flames.

And at that moment, Draco had never been more thankful for his obsessive nature. Because after the war, after he mastered wandless magic, the next thing Draco had done was teach himself the counter-curse for Fiendfyre. It hadn't been easy. The counter-curse was as devilishly difficult to control as the Fiendfyre itself, and he'd nearly killed himself a dozen times over as he practiced. But he'd forced himself to face his fear and learned it. He'd never attempted it with a fire even a fraction this large or this widespread, but he could do this. He would do this.

He would save them both.

Draco raised his wand, looped it through the air and shouted the spell. Instantly, glowing blue ropes shot from his wand, weaving together in mid-air and sweeping over the room, sweeping over all of the creatures before cinching tight. But it stretched too thin, and one rushing charge from a fiery rhinoceros broke through, and the net unraveled. Draco cast again, but this time the net disintegrated on contact. Again and again he failed, and his desperation and panic grew. The fire was too big, too widespread. He couldn't do it.

"I'm not strong enough!" He turned to Harry. "You have to do it! Like this!"

He grabbed Harry's wand hand in his own and swept it through the looping motions of the spell.

Harry cast. Again, glowing blue ropes shot into the air, but instead of weaving together to form a delicate net, they fused into a misshapen lump and fell heavily amidst the flames. It crushed out a tiger, but the rest of the creatures neatly avoided it. He tried again, and again, desperately repeating the spell with the same failed results even though it was clear he didn't have nearly enough control to make it work.

And there they were, each holding half of the answer and helpless to do anything useful with it. Draco wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, and then it struck him. They each had half of the answer. There was no way for him to lend Harry his control of magic, but… Oh Merlin, it was dangerous and all sorts of illegal, but he could still save them.

"Shield Charm around us! Now!" Draco shouted.

"Protego Maxima!" Harry cried, and a glittering protective bubble surrounded them.

The Fiendfyre creatures threw themselves against it, and it shuddered but held. It wouldn't hold long, maybe thirty seconds, a minute at the most. Draco didn't need half that long.

He turned to Harry. "Do you trust me?"

"Absolutely," Harry said without hesitation.

"Put away your wand and give me your right hand."

Harry wavered only an instant before holstering his wand and holding out his hand. Draco didn't bother to explain what he was doing; that would take precious time they didn't have. He cast a Diffindo over Harry's palm, opening a deep cut. Harry flinched back, but Draco caught his wrist.

"Don't move," he said. "Cup your hand a bit. I need the blood."

Harry's eyes went wide behind his glasses. "You're doing blood magic?"

Draco didn't bother to answer, and cast another Diffindo over his own left hand. Blood welled in the shallow basin of his palm. He drew in a deep breath, exhaled slowly as he took three heartbeats to center himself. If he fucked this up…

Well. If he fucked this up, it wouldn't matter because they'd both be dead.

Slowly, Draco recited a long string of Latin while twirling his wand around Harry's hand, around his own hand, and then between them. As he finished the last words of the spell, he took Harry's right hand in his left. There was a sizzle of heat as the edges of their wounds knit together in a sickening tug of skin, but that was all.

Had he done it wrong? For a moment Draco panicked, but then… just there… Yes. The connection. There was no time for subtlety here, no time for being gentle or delicate. This would probably hurt Harry, a cruel but necessary violation that he didn't even have time to properly explain.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?" Harry asked, and Draco didn't answer as he pushed himself through the connection and grabbed hold of Harry's magic.

Draco had always pictured his own magic as a well, deep and cool. He'd always known that Harry was more powerful, and so had imagined Harry's magic as a sprawling lake or a rushing stream. He was wrong. Utterly, entirely, completely wrong. Harry's magic was like an ocean, a sea in storm, a tempest, wild and capricious and boundless, and Draco could have gladly drowned himself in it, sunk down to the bottom and drunk it all in and let it consume him from the inside out.

He drew it in, pulling as much of it as he could into himself until he could feel it burning just beneath his skin and up his throat, crackling his hair with static. Every inch of him itched with it. His vision blurred and his eyes rolled back and he felt himself growing suddenly, achingly hard. And he hadn't even made a dent in Harry's magic, had scooped out a single bucket from an ocean. Oh Merlin, what he could do with this much power… He felt dizzy with it, marvelously intoxicated, sick in the most magnificent way. He pulled in still more and felt it hum through his veins, throbbing in his very bones.

"Ahh," Harry moaned, clutching at Draco's hand with both of his.

The Shield Charm fell, but Draco was ready. The Fiendfyre rushed forward, dragons and leopards and serpents tumbling over each other in their eagerness to get him, and he screamed the counter-curse. He didn't use his wand; he didn't need it. The netting surged from his outstretched fingers, flowing out and blanketing the entire room before cinching tight. The Fiendfyre struggled against it, and Draco drew more of Harry's magic, strengthening his spell. Beside him, Harry had fallen to his knees and was crying out, and Draco laughed wildly, made giddy by the sheer amount of power flowing through him. The netting of his spell reached the floor and one by one the fiery creatures were snuffed out in little puffs of sparks and smoke.

Draco released the spell and let his knees buckle beneath him, falling to sit heavily on the floor beside Harry, who blinked dazedly at him.

"Draco…" he rasped.

Draco just shook his head and peeled their hands apart, then used the last of Harry's magic inside him to Vanish the blood and heal their palms. Once that last little bit was gone, he felt

oddly empty and bereft. He prodded at where the connection had been and it ached faintly, like a sore tooth. He couldn't keep himself from prodding at it again.

"Potter! Malfoy!"

He hadn't noticed that the other Aurors had figured out how to get the door open, and now they all came rushing in.

"Oh thank Merlin! We saw the Fiendfyre and were afraid you'd… How on earth did you do it, Potter?"

"Me?" Harry blinked up at the Auror who had spoken. "I…"

"He was wonderful," Draco said, closing his hand around Harry's wrist and squeezing tight. "Absolutely brilliant. Saved my life."

"Erm," said Harry. He glanced at Draco.

Draco shook his head slightly. "Absolutely brilliant," he repeated firmly.

Once the other Aurors had ascertained that no one had been injured badly enough to warrant a trip to St. Mungo's and found no trace of the wizard they'd been pursuing, and of course they all thoroughly congratulated Harry on his spectacular wand work, they all Apparated back to the Ministry, and Draco hesitated as the other Aurors dispersed, and held Harry back with a subtle tug to his sleeve.

"He was after you," Draco said. "I thought the trap was meant for me, but it was about you."

Harry gave him a wan smile. "He's not the first person to try to make a name for himself by killing the Boy Who Lived. And unfortunately I'm sure he won't be the last."

He went off to Shacklebolt's office after that, and Draco watched him go. Suddenly, people's dislike of Draco didn't seem so bad. He was sneered at and snubbed, yes, and he received an astounding array of angry mail. But at least no one was trying to kill him. Harry had saved them all, and all that had done was paint a target on his back for the next wizard hoping to fill the Dark Lord's shoes.

Draco went back to the office he shared with Harry and tried to get a start on the paperwork, but he couldn't concentrate.

He shuddered as he remembered the sensation of being immersed in Harry's magic, how it felt to pull it in until it saturated every inch of him. He still couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that Harry walked around with *that* inside him and acted like it was somehow normal. That he laughed at Weasley's stupid jokes and drank overly-sweet tea and made futile attempts at taming his horrible hair, and all the while he had that tempest raging inside him.

All that power, and it seemed almost sacrilegious that he mostly used it to Accio a quill from across the room when he was too lazy to get up, or spell the wrinkles from his robes. Quite poorly, too. Boundless magical energy, and the man still couldn't perform a decent Ironing Charm. He could bring the whole building down around their ears if he wanted to, and he

went around in wrinkled robes. And there was something it all that was just so *Harry* that it made Draco's heart clench with a sudden rush of affection for him.

Draco rubbed at his eyes and peered up at the clock. Nearly five. Maybe he should just go home early since he didn't think he'd get anything useful done. He sighed and picked up the parchment again to read over what he'd written so far, but he stared at the words without really seeing them. And all he could think of was the feeling of Harry's magic humming through his veins.

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Harry should have know better than to try to lie to Kingsley, he really should have. But all he could think of was the desperate plea in Draco's eyes as he'd shook his head once and told the other Aurors that Harry had saved them both. And so he'd repeated that story, and now Kingsley's eyes bored into his own from across the desk in that way that made Harry feel about two inches tall and entirely exposed.

"Really," Kingsley said. "Because the counter-curse for Fiendfyre isn't widely known."

That was certainly true, if only because most people weren't crazy enough to cast Fiendfyre in the first place. And here Harry had gotten to experience it twice so far. Wasn't life just a joy?

Harry shifted in his seat. "I, erm, Draco taught it to me." He tried to will himself to sit still, but his skin felt vaguely itchy and too tight.

"*Really*," Kingsley said again. "Because the counter-curse for Fiendfyre is an incredibly complicated bit of magic, and if I may speak frankly for a moment, I didn't think you were capable of such delicacy."

Harry sighed. "I may have not done the actual casting," he admitted. "Draco tried, and he wasn't strong enough to hold it. Then I tried, but I didn't have the control to make it work properly. So we… Look, I know what we did was probably illegal but it was as much me as it was Draco and it saved our lives."

Kingsley's eyes had darkened. "Go on…"

"I'm… not exactly sure what spell it was. Draco did the casting there. He cut our palms and said a bunch of Latin and made a lot of wand motions like this." Harry paused and looped his index finger through the air. "And then he took my hand and our cuts healed together." He couldn't quite suppress a shudder at the memory of feeling his skin fusing together with Draco's. "And then he could draw on my magic to boost his own to make the counter-curse work."

A few seconds of silence ticked by, and Harry steeled himself for the explosion.

“Have you completely taken leave of your senses, Potter?” Kingsley demanded. “Have you forgotten that you’re investigating him *for murder*? That spell is highly illegal, and for good reason. Do you have any idea what would happen if he’d drained your magic completely? You’d be dead.”

Harry’s hands curled into fists. “With all due respect, Sir, I’d have been dead if I hadn’t let him do it.”

“And now? If he decided to drain you now that you’re out of danger?”

Harry frowned. “He can’t. The spell’s over, right?”

Kingsley heaved a long-suffering sort of sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You don’t know anything about that spell, do you?”

“It’s not like he really had a chance to explain about it,” Harry said defensively.

“It’s called The Joining of Hands,” Kingsley went on. “Oh, don’t make that face. It sounds like some sort of marriage bond because it’s based on one.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. “I’m married to Draco?”

“*No*, Harry, I said it’s based on one.” Kingsley said. “It was popular in the 1300s, and encouraged a witch to gives herself over entirely to her husband. However, it was quickly adapted for dueling and other darker purposes. If a wizard needed a boost to his own magic, he could capture and forcibly cast this spell on other wizards, and drain them dry. The connection is entirely one-way, and usually lasts for somewhere between six and eight hours, depending on the competency of the caster and the amount of magic initially transferred over the connection.”

“Um,” Harry said. He shifted in his seat again, willed himself to quit fidgeting, and instantly began tapping his foot. “Very, and a lot.”

“Then the bond might last for upwards of twelve hours, maybe as much as sixteen. And during that time, if you have so much as a papercut, he can use it to access all of your magic again without recasting the original spell. I’m ordering you to go home. Take the rest of the day off, and avoid Auror Malfoy until tomorrow morning.”

“But he wouldn’t do that,” Harry said. He shifted again. He didn’t know why he felt off, itchy and uncomfortable and restless. He tried to push the feeling aside. “He only did the spell to save us.”

“Potter,” Kingsley said, his voice low and serious. “I am growing increasingly concerned with your ability to remain objective throughout this investigation. I know you’ve been having him over to your flat, and inviting him along on your pub nights. You’re calling him Draco, for Merlin’s sake!”

“But today proves he’s innocent, doesn’t it?” Harry said a bit desperately. “Someone tried to kill me, and if they’d succeeded, all the other Aurors would have seen is the two of us

walking into an empty room, and only Draco coming out again. I told you that someone's trying to frame Draco for killing his partners. Today was the latest attempt."

"All today proves is that you have a dangerous job, Harry," Kingsley said gently. "And it doesn't explain the rest."

"Look at the files," Harry insisted, and he sounded frantic even to his own ears. He didn't understand why Kingsley refused to consider that Draco might be innocent. It wasn't like him at all to ignore facts like this. "Look and see who reported the initial incident."

"I already have," Kingsley said. "The fake Patrolmen Gayle and Metcalfe weren't involved. It came in through the Improper Use of Magic office." He eyed Harry steadily for a moment. "Harry, I'm concerned for you. If you feel that you're getting too close to him to remain objective, I can have you reassigned."

"No," Harry said quickly. If even Kingsley was this dead-set against Draco, then Harry was his only hope. He had to do whatever it took to stay on the case. "I mean, no, that's fine. I'm not… I'm not really his friend. I'm just getting close to him for the investigation. I'm not likely to find out much of anything here, he's too careful for that. But if I can get close to him, even get him to invite me over to his place, I might find out more." He swallowed hard against any further babbling and waited to see if Kingsley would accept his lie.

Kingsley let out a deep breath. "Good, that's very good," he said, obviously relieved. "But I'd appreciate if you'd include these details in your reports in the future. It'd save me a lot of worry."

"Of course, right. But…" Harry said. "I really do think he's innocent."

"Noted. In the meantime, you'll continue with your investigation until you either find me proof of that, or proof that you are wrong. Until then…"

Harry could tell when he was being dismissed. "Right." He stood to leave, thankful because Kingsley's office had begun to feel far too small.

Out in the hallway, he expected the itchy, claustrophobic feeling to vanish, but it didn't. If anything it felt like it intensified as he walked down the hall and made his way back to his office. After the day he'd had, he had every reason to take off a bit early, but he also wanted to check on Draco before he left.

He walked into his office to find Draco standing near his desk, just looping the strap of his work bag over his shoulder. Draco looked up and their eyes met and just like that the air between them seemed to ignite. For a second they stood frozen, but then they drew together like metal filings to a magnet, a moth to a flame, and it all made an awful sort of sense because they were still under the influence of the bond, weren't they? And really, Kingsley should have mentioned this little side effect of the spell, though he had also told Harry to go straight home and now Harry sort of wished he'd listened.

They came together in the middle of the room and Draco crushed his lips to Harry's, and then there was nothing but the warmth of his body and the slick heat of his mouth and that was

more than enough to make Harry's brain quit working. His hands slid down Draco's back to cup his arse, and Draco groaned and pressed himself closer against Harry, and now Harry could feel the hard length of him through his trousers and he was helpless to keep from rubbing himself against it.

Draco tore his mouth away, but Harry didn't mind so much because that just exposed the slender column of Draco's throat, and Harry fastened his mouth to it and sucked hard.

"We… Oh Merlin, you're… we're at work. We can't…" Draco protested faintly even as one hand curled around the back of Harry's head to keep him in place.

"No," Harry said. "You're right. We can't do this at work." He tightened his arms around Draco. "Hold on."

Normally he'd never have even considered this, but the Apparition Point was too far away and the Floos were all the way down in the Atrium, and Harry didn't think he could keep his hands off Draco long enough to get there. There was only one answer that made sense to Harry's lust-addled brain, so he took it. He concentrated, twisted slightly in place and *pushed*, and there was a loud bang and a ragged screeching that sounded like metal on metal, like a car crash, followed by a sick tearing sensation, and then he and Draco stood in Harry's living room.

Draco threw himself back, his eyes wide, and for a few seconds his mouth worked open and shut soundlessly, like a fish. "You… you lunatic!" he burst out. "You just Apparated us right out of the bloody Ministry! Fucking hell, do you have any idea how many wards you just tore through? Oh Merlin, that place is probably screaming with alarms right now!" He coughed out a shivery, nervous laugh. "I bet Shacklebolt's just shit himself. You are in *so much trouble*."

"They don't know it was me," Harry said, but flung a locking spell at his Floo just in case.

"Are you stupid? You're the only one powerful enough to rip through the Ministry's wards, some of which, I feel I should point out, are there specifically to prevent Apparating." He stumbled back another step, his work bag sliding off his shoulder to land on the floor with a thud, and now there was just too much distance between them.

Harry hauled Draco back against him. "I couldn't wait."

"You couldn't wait," he repeated, and shuddered in Harry's arms. His eyes fluttered shut and he swayed closer to Harry. "You did it for me. Because you couldn't wait."

And before Harry could reply, Draco's lips crashed against his own again and Draco's tongue licked into his mouth. Harry snogged him back, the kiss turning messy and frantic. Harry was more aroused than he'd ever been in his entire life, so hard it was almost painful. He needed Draco like he needed air, and it still wasn't enough.

"Sofa," Harry gasped. "Now."

Draco looked dazed. "What?"

“Sofa, now,” Harry repeated. “Or I’m going to take you right here on the floor.”

They stumbled over to the sofa, still trying to kiss, nearly going down as Draco tripped over his own bag, but they finally made it and Harry let himself tumble backward onto the cushions. Draco landed on top of him, and their teeth clacked painfully together, but Harry swept his tongue against Draco’s and the brief pain was forgotten.

He wanted to get their clothes off enough to touch skin, but that meant separating far enough to reach buttons and zips and Harry couldn’t bring himself to push Draco away long enough to do it. He jerked the tail of Draco’s shirt free from his trousers and slid his hands up Draco’s back, and Draco moaned and pushed against Harry, the hard length of his erection pressing into Harry’s groin, sending a shiver of arousal through him. Harry pressed back, dragging his own cock over the ridge of Draco’s and oh dear god he absolutely needed this, how had he lived this long without it? He curled his tongue against Draco’s as he rocked his hips up again, and Draco knotted one hand in his hair and *pulled* as he bit at Harry’s mouth.

Their movements grew rougher as they frotted against each other, sofa springs creaking beneath them with every motion. Harry dragged his nails down Draco’s back, and Draco’s movements went jerky. Harry could tell when he reached the edge, because the muscles of Draco’s back went taut beneath his hands, then his whole body went rigid and he made a deliciously helpless little moaning sound that vibrated through Harry’s mouth, and that was all it took to push him over the edge as well.

He came so hard his vision blacked out, nothing but swirling darkness with bright points of light sparking through it, and it was absolutely the best thing he’d felt in his entire life when every nerve in his body felt like it lit itself on fire as his climax slammed through him in a sudden rush of uncoiling tension.

Harry drifted back to himself slowly. At some point he must have stopped kissing Draco, because now Draco’s face was pressed to his neck, his breath tickling the skin just above Harry’s collarbone with every exhale. Harry still had his hands stuck up the back of Draco’s shirt.

They were ridiculous, weren’t they? Here they’d stumbled in and frotted against each other until they’d both come in their pants like a couple of randy teenagers. Not exactly how he’d imagined what getting off with Draco for the first time would be like, but he’d take it. He pressed a kiss to the crown of Draco’s head and sighed.

“Well,” Harry said.

“Mmnph,” Draco replied, face still buried against Harry’s neck.

“That was… intense.”

“Mmnph,” Draco said again.

They lay together in silence, Harry rubbing one hand slowly over the warm skin of Draco’s back. He spread his fingers, letting his thumb drag along Draco’s left side, along his ribs, and Draco squirmed away from the touch with a noise that sounded suspiciously like a giggle.

“Sorry,” he murmured. “Tickles a bit when he does that. So,” he continued before Harry could ask just what the hell that meant. He sat up slowly, and Harry sat up as well. “I suppose I should tell you what the hell just happened.” He paused for a moment, looking flushed and rumpled and a little embarrassed. Harry loved it. “It’s the bond. Temporary, of course,” he added quickly. “The spell I cast to reach your magic instigated a temporary bond between us. It’ll take some time to fade, but we should be fine by tomorrow.” He glanced uncertainly up at Harry. “I’d normally never cast anything like that without your express permission, but there wasn’t exactly time for explanations.”

Harry took Draco’s hand in his and pressed a kiss to his palm, noticing the thin white scar across it. “It’s fine,” he said. “I’d have done the same thing in your place.” He glanced down at his right hand and found a matching scar spanning his own palm. St. Mungo’s could get rid of it for him, but for now Harry thought he’d keep it.

“Thanks. I…” Draco trailed off and his cheeks grew pinker. “For now it would be best if we stayed together. The spell I did is a variation of an old Marriage Bond, and unfortunately it’s retained the tendency to urge the participants to, ah, consummate their union. The effects shouldn’t be as bad if we stay close.”

“I wouldn’t exactly mind a repeat,” Harry said with a grin. He nuzzled at Draco’s neck.

“I would,” Draco said, leaning away. “That is, I did enjoy it. But I don’t like being that far out of control.” He paused. “So, is it all right if I stay the night?”

Harry leaned over again and kissed his cheek. “You don’t have to ask. You’re always welcome here.” He sniffed Draco’s hair and caught a whiff of sulfur and smoke. “Although I’d ask you to shower, please. You smell like Fiendfyre.”

“Ugh,” said Draco, and Harry laughed.

“Come along, you,” he said, standing and tugging Draco up along with him. He led him through his bedroom and into the bathroom. “Here’s a towel, and washcloth.” He tugged back the shower curtain. “Soap and shampoo and stuff is just there.”

“What on earth is that?” Draco asked, leaning into the shower a bit to get a better look at the two charred lumps of plastic fused to the lip of the bathtub.

“Oh, that,” Harry said. He rubbed one hand over the back of his neck. “Well, um, do you remember when you did that thing with the wandless Incendio, and then the next morning you asked me if I’d tried it? This is where I did it. That,” He gestured at the melted plastic, “is what’s left of my previous bottles of shampoo and conditioner. I can’t get it off.”

Draco’s lips twitched like he was fighting down a smile. “I see. Well, having now experienced your magic firsthand, I’ll just repeat my previous statement and say that frankly I’m surprised you didn’t burn down your whole flat. Actually, no, I’ll amend that and say I’m surprised you didn’t burn down the whole *block*. And I’ll see what I can do about that,” He mimicked Harry’s gesture at the charred plastic lumps, “while I’m in there.”

“Much appreciated,” Harry said. “I’ll just leave you to it, then. And get you some clothes.”

He left, leaving the door open just a crack behind him and trying not to listen to the rustle of Draco removing his clothing. Instead he went to his bureau and pulled open a drawer to sort through a stack of t-shirts until he found a blue one he thought Draco would look marvelous in, then changed his mind and dug until he found a black one instead. Snickering to himself, he opened the top drawer to get underpants and groaned when he only saw two pairs. Had it really been that long since he'd done laundry? He guessed he'd be nice to Draco and let him have the plain red pair, and kept the pair with the snitches on them for himself. He added a pair of light grey cotton pajama bottoms to his stack.

As soon as he heard the shower start up and the rustle-scrape of the curtain sliding closed, Harry knocked lightly on the door. "I'll just leave you some pajamas on the counter, okay?" he called over the rushing hiss of the shower.

"Thanks!" Draco called back, and then, softer, "Scourgify!"

Smiling, Harry retreated to the living room and idly leafed through an old issue of *Quidditch Quarterly* while he waited for Draco to finish up. Within a few minutes, his skin began to itch as it had in Kingsley's office and he shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. He'd only skimmed two articles when he heard the shower go off, and barely gotten through half of a third when Draco appeared in the doorway of his bedroom, hair ruffled and damp, looking equal parts aggravated and amused.

"*Really*, Potter?" he asked, plucking at his shirt. "I suppose you think you're funny."

Harry grinned. He'd given Draco his Rolling Stones shirt, the one with the big red mouth on the front that Draco always spent the day making snide comments about every time Harry wore it to work. "Not as funny as I could be, believe me. I'm going to go hop in the shower. I won't be but a minute."

Harry took the quickest shower of his life, barely five minutes from the time he stepped in to when he was pulling a clean pair of underpants over his bare arse. He dragged on a grey t-shirt and a pair of blue plaid pajama bottoms to cover up those stupid snitches. He opened up the bathroom door and found Draco lingering just outside.

"I was about to come in there after you," he admitted, sliding his arms around Harry's waist.

Harry wrapped his arms around Draco and kissed him lightly. "This is the bond again?" he asked.

Draco nodded against him. "We weren't apart for as long or by as much distance as we were earlier," he said. "I think if we do this for a little while it'll settle down again."

That didn't sound too bad to Harry. There was something gentle and comforting about holding Draco like this, and being held by him in turn. Draco felt warm and solid against him, and the slow rise and fall of his ribs as he breathed lulled Harry a bit. Somehow, this felt even more intimate than what they'd done on the sofa.

"This is nice," he said softly, letting his chin rest on Draco's shoulder.

“Mmm,” Draco agreed, gently rubbing the tip of his nose in Harry’s hair.

Harry wanted to keep holding Draco, so he asked, “I know it’s early but it’s been a hell of a day. Would you mind going to bed now?”

“I… But we… we just…” he stammered.

Harry had never heard Draco that flustered before, and looked up to find him blushing. He laughed. “I meant to sleep, you silly git.”

“It’s not funny,” Draco muttered.

“How prudish you are about sex? It absolutely is,” Harry said.

“I’m not prudish,” Draco shot back, his voice tense and prim. “It’s just not something we purebloods ever talk about. It’s considered crude.”

Harry blinked at him. “Never? Like, never ever, not at all?”

“No.”

A horrible thought occurred to him and he took a step back. “Draco, are we going to have to have *the talk*?” Draco’s blank look at that didn’t ease Harry’s fears any. “Please tell me you know how sex works.”

“Of course I do,” Draco snapped indignantly, though his cheeks went pink. “Well, the basics in any case, if not the ins and outs.”

The way he flushed when Harry chuckled told him that Draco hadn’t meant that as a pun.

He scowled at Harry. “I went to boarding school. Seven years in a dorm, Potter. Of course I know how sex works.”

Harry thought back to his own days at said boarding school and how the talk in Gryffindor Tower had ranged from gravely misinformed to blatantly wrong. If conversation in the Slytherin dorms had been Draco’s only sex education, then god only knew what he had learned.

“Maybe we really should have that talk,” Harry said.

Draco’s scowl evolved into a glare. “That’s not a conversation we’re ever having, Potter. Ever.”

Harry laughed and stepped closer to Draco again, and nipped at his neck. “Well, I suppose I can just show you instead.”

“You… Well. That would be acceptable, I suppose,” Draco said.

Harry yawned against Draco’s throat, and pulled back again after a final kiss to his leaping pulse. “Tomorrow, maybe. For now, I really did mean it when I said I was ready for bed.”

They separated, and Draco trailed after Harry as he walked to the bed. “Which side do you want?”

“I’ve always slept in the middle.”

“Mm,” Harry said through another yawn. “I’ll take the right, then.”

They climbed into bed and Harry turned off the lights. He rolled onto his side to find that Draco was curled up facing away from him, and there was entirely too much empty mattress between them. Harry reached out and caught Draco by the hips and pulled him across the sheets until his arse hit Harry’s thighs. Harry slid his arms over Draco’s middle and nuzzled at the back of his neck, relishing the feel of Draco’s soft warm skin against his lips.

“Much better,” he said.

Draco snorted. “Figures you’d be a cuddler.” But he pushed back against Harry despite his complaint, settling in just a little bit closer.

“Yep,” Harry said and pressed a sleepy kiss to Draco’s shoulder. “Night, Draco.”

Draco found the hand Harry had draped over him and linked their fingers together. “Goodnight, Potter.”

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Draco awoke, disoriented, heart pounding and skin sticky with sweat. He’d dreamed of Fiendfyre, of course he had, and he’d been an idiot to think even for a minute that he wouldn’t. As his heartbeat slowed, he was only grateful that he hadn’t screamed aloud and woken Harry.

The window was open and there was more than enough light from the streetlamp outside to illuminate the room. Slowly, Draco sat up and looked down at Harry. He was lying on his side, facing Draco, his knees tucked up to his chest and his hands curled into loose fists under his chin, his head bent so far forward it was nearly off the pillow. For a moment, Draco felt like he’d caught a glimpse of the little boy who grew up locked in a cupboard, and his heart ached. He reached out and stroked a gentle hand through Harry’s hair, and Harry murmured softly in his sleep and curled up even tighter.

Draco sighed and withdrew his hand, watched Harry for a few more minutes, then slid quietly out of bed. He made his way to the living room and found his work bag just where he’d left it on the floor. He slipped a hand inside and found a small vial. He rolled it between his fingers, and frowned. Too big, this was his pick-me-up potion. He replaced it, and withdrew a different vial. More slender and with a cap instead of a cork, this was the one he was after.

He opened it and swallowed it down in one gulp, then put the empty vial back in his back as the too-sweet taste of blueberries faded on his tongue. This was his own version of Dreamless Sleep, not nearly as potent as the original but also lacking the addictive nature of it. Draco's version just took the edge off his dreams, making them hazy and indistinct. He still might have nightmares, but he wouldn't wake up screaming from them. He had no intention of sharing a bed with Harry ever again without taking this potion.

Quietly, Draco crept back into the bedroom. He'd grown uncomfortably warm during the night, so he shucked off his pajama bottoms before sliding back beneath the sheets and blankets. Harry slept on, still curled up as small as he could get. Carefully, Draco reached out and tugged one of his hands forward. Harry mumbled something and shifted, but didn't draw his hand back. Draco held his breath until Harry settled again, then very gently he linked his fingers through Harry's.

With Harry's warm fingers tangled with his own and Harry's soft breaths filling his ears, Draco closed his eyes and let the potion do its work.

Chapter 11

Harry woke slowly to warm golden rays of sunlight streaming through his window and a warm body tucked into bed beside him. For a moment, his eyes swept over the bright hair and pale limbs flung out haphazardly in sleep without really understanding, and then he woke the rest of the way in a dizzying rush.

Draco had stayed the night.

Slowly, Harry pushed himself up on one elbow and snagged his glasses from the bedside table so he could see properly. In contrast to how rigidly Draco normally held himself while awake, so precisely aware of every inch of himself, in sleep he sprawled. He lay on his back with his head turned toward Harry. His right arm lay draped across his chest while his left stretched over his head. His left leg dangled half off the bed. He seemed younger in sleep, with his hair mussed and falling over his forehead, eyes lightly closed, and his lips slightly parted. Harry felt his heart swell, along with another part of him.

He pressed a hand to his morning erection as he watched Draco. He really wanted to wake him up by sliding a slick finger into his arse, a lovely way to wake up in Harry's opinion. But they hadn't discussed that yet, and he had no idea how Draco would react to that sort of thing, especially if just talking about sex had him blushing in a most un-Malfoy-like way that Harry found sort of sad and sort of ridiculous and highly amusing all at once.

A blowjob, then. Everyone likes a blowjob.

Moving slowly so as not to wake him just yet, Harry gently peeled back the bed sheets and was delighted to discover that at some point during the night Draco had kicked off his pajama bottoms. Harry remembered every inch of those long pale legs from their time in the oven trap, but finding them in his bed was so much better. Shifting carefully, he nudged Draco's legs apart until he could sit between them, and thought he'd best begin at the bottom. Weeks ago when they'd been trapped together, Harry had fantasized about those elegant feet and ankles. And now here they were, his for the taking. Starting with the hard ridge of Draco's instep, Harry pressed warm kisses to pale skin, edging upward by inches. He lingered on Draco's ankle, gently mouthing his way along the sharp curve of bone, and couldn't resist flicking his tongue over a small white scar nestled in the shallow dip just between his Achilles tendon and the hard knob of his ankle bone. Draco shifted slightly in his sleep, and Harry reluctantly left that ankle behind and made his way up the firm curve of Draco's calf, fine gold hairs tickling against his lips.

He made it to the inside of Draco's knee by the time Draco finally stirred. "Harry?" he asked, his voice rough with sleep.

"Hm?" Harry said as he lightly kissed his way up the inside of Draco's thigh. Draco's legs fell open a little more.

"What're you doing?"

“Saying good morning,” Harry murmured as he reached the top of Draco’s thigh. “With my mouth on your cock.”

“Oh.” He shifted a bit, propping himself up on his elbows. His hair stuck up on one side and he had pillow creases on his cheek. Harry thought he’d never looked more beautiful.

Harry gently nuzzled the soft swell of his bollocks through the thin cotton of his underpants, inhaling the dark, musky scent of him. It made Harry’s mouth water. “It’s a *very* good morning.”

“I see,” Draco said faintly. “Well. Carry on, then.”

“I intend to,” Harry said. He dragged the tip of his nose along Draco’s half-hard prick and felt it fill a little more at the slight contact.

Moving up a bit, he pressed his lips to the strip of skin just above Draco’s waistband in little nibbling kisses. Reaching up with his right hand, Harry slid his palm up Draco’s left side, pushing the shirt up a little higher to expose more of Draco’s abdomen, and—

Something dark whipped by just under his nose.

Harry jerked back with a yelp. “What the fuck?”

Draco blinked at him. “What?”

“Something *moved*,” Harry said, staring down at Draco’s side. Whatever it was had disappeared back up his shirt. Really, what the fuck?

Draco frowned at him for a long moment, then the confusion cleared and he laughed. “Oh, that’s right. You haven’t seen him yet.”

“What? Seen who?”

“Here,” Draco said.

He sat up, and Harry sat up as well to give him room. Draco scooted so that he presented his left side to Harry and dragged his shirt over his head in one smooth movement. And there on his side was the most stunning tattoo that Harry had ever seen. Stretching from Draco’s waist to nearly his armpit, it was all black, the dark ink a startling contrast over Draco’s white skin, and incredibly intricate. Harry leaned closer. Every claw, every tooth, every scale was rendered in exquisite detail.

“What kind is it?” he asked, leaning closer still. It was longer, slinkier than most breeds, but not quite as long or thin as a Chinese Fireball.

“Pyreneesian Crested,” Draco said. He sounded amused. “You can touch it. He won’t bite.”

Harry reached out and gently stroked a finger down Draco’s ribs, and let out a delighted laugh when the dragon twisted itself up in a knot and blew a plume of smoke. He touched it again, and it flapped its wings. Again, and it stretched and breathed a jet of fire that licked up

Draco's back to his shoulderblade. Draco squirmed and let out a laugh that sounded dangerously close to a giggle.

"Sorry. Tickles a bit when he does that," he said, and Harry remembered last night. He briefly regretted not pressing Draco about it then, because he'd already lost almost half a day of knowing about this brilliant tattoo. He decided that the best thing to do would simply be to make up for lost time.

Harry touched it again and watched as it lashed its tail and craned its neck. "This is absolutely the hottest thing I've ever seen. How long have you had it?"

"I got it summer between fifth and sixth year," Draco said.

Harry looked up at his face, surprised. "Really? I'd have thought you would've shown it off. It was all over school when Seamus got his done. And his lion wasn't nearly this nice."

Draco shrugged a shoulder and scratched idly at his ribs. The dragon snapped at his fingers. "I wanted to, but you'll recall I had quite a lot going on that year so I hid it under a glamour. I was underage when I got it, and the last thing I needed at that point was for someone to tell my parents." He shrugged again and when he continued his voice was a little too casual. "I got it in July. I was Marked in August, you know. I knew it was going to happen, and…"

"You did it first," Harry said. "You marked yourself before he could do it."

For a heartbeat, Draco stared into his eyes, and then his face broke into the brightest smile Harry had ever seen, and Harry felt like he'd gotten something very important exactly right. "I *knew* you'd understand," Draco said.

Harry had thought his morning couldn't get any better than waking with Draco in his bed, but now Draco was also nearly-naked and had a great big tattoo down his side and was beaming at him like Harry was the most brilliant thing he'd ever laid eyes on, and Harry wanted him so badly he thought he might go mad with it if he didn't touch him soon. So he kissed Draco and pressed him back down to the bed, then sat back so he could get a good look at him in all his smiling mostly-naked tattooed glory. And his stomach dropped.

For a moment, couldn't do anything but stare dumbly at the silvery-white scars crisscrossing Draco's torso, his mouth hanging uselessly open.

"Oh fuck," Draco said, sitting up again.

"I did that," Harry said as guilt flared through him. "I…"

"Potter," Draco snapped. "Stop it."

It was a struggle to drag his eyes away from those scars, but he managed and looked up only to find Draco scowling at him. Harry blinked, confused. "But I…"

Draco shoved him, hard enough that he nearly sent Harry toppling off the edge of the mattress. "I mean it. I don't want to hear any of your wibbling. You're sorry about it, I forgave you ages ago, and there's really nothing more that needs to be said."

“I… Er. All right. I just, I didn’t realize it had scarred.”

Now Draco looked annoyed. “Of course it scarred,” he said in his talking-to-a-halfwit voice. “I know for a fact you know all about Curse Scars.” He flicked Harry’s forehead, right over the lightning bolt. “Can we go back to talking about how my tattoo is the hottest thing you’ve ever seen? I liked where that conversation was going.”

Harry let out a surprised little laugh. “You are incredible,” he said. “Did you know that? Absolutely incredible.”

“I know,” Draco said with a faint smirk. “But I’ll let you tell me anyhow.”

“And beautiful,” Harry added. He hauled Draco up against him and kissed his neck. “Every inch of you.”

Draco let his head fall back to give Harry better access to his throat. “Mmm, now I think you’re just trying to win me over with flattery.”

Harry bit at the slope where Draco’s neck became his shoulder. “Is it working?”

“A little too well,” he said. Draco gently pulled loose from Harry’s grasp and stood. “I really ought to leave. I have to go home to shower and change.”

Harry stood up and stretched. “Can’t you just go to work from here?”

“Of course not.” Draco told him. “What are people going to think if we show up together and I’m wearing the same clothes I wore yesterday? Or worse, if I show up in *your* clothes?”

Harry snorted. “I don’t think they’ll think much of anything, Draco, seeing as how we both wear the same uniform robes.”

“You know what I mean,” Draco said, distractedly flapping a hand in Harry’s direction. “It’s what’s underneath that counts.”

Harry stepped up from behind and slid his arms around him, letting his palms drag over the flat plane of Draco’s abdomen. “I’ll say it is.”

“Stop that,” he said, swatting away Harry’s wandering hands. “Stop that right now, we don’t —There’s not *time* for that. We’re going to be late! Merlin, is this what it’s going to be like with you?”

Harry laughed. “What, me completely unable to keep my hands off you? Pretty much, I’m afraid.”

Reluctantly, Harry let Draco step out of his embrace, but couldn’t resist reaching out to pinch his bum. Draco batted his hand away and half-turned to fix him with an exasperated glare.

“Will you at least shower here?” Harry asked. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

“We really shouldn’t,” Draco said, but he didn’t sound at all sure. “We’ll probably be late.”

“Then we’ll stay late. Take a half-hour lunch or something,” Harry offered.

He could see Draco give in a split second before he sighed and said, “Fine.”

Grinning, Harry led him into the bathroom where he stripped off his pajama bottoms and tossed them onto the counter.

“Good grief, are you really wearing those things again?”

Harry looked down at the little golden snitches fluttering on the blue fabric over his groin. He’d managed to forget about them. “Shut it, I just haven’t done laundry in a while. You know, with everything else we can do, it’s a wonder that Wizards haven’t come up with a way to get laundry to do itself.”

“We have. We call it house elves.” Draco stared some more. “You know, I really can’t take you seriously while you’re wearing those things.”

“They’re not that bad,” Harry said defensively even though, yes, they really were that bad.

Draco sighed and smiled a little. “You’re right. I used to have a pair just like that, you know.”

Harry blinked at him. “Really?” He couldn’t quite imagine Draco in ridiculous underpants.

“Yes, Potter,” Draco continued with vicious amusement, “When I was *five*. Although the pair with the little bubbling cauldrons were my favorite.”

“If they bother you so much, you can just take them off me,” Harry said. He leaned back against the counter, canting his hips forward just a bit.

Draco swallowed, all traces of humor gone now, his eyes pinned to the way Harry’s erection strained the fabric of his underpants. He stepped a bit closer and hooked his thumbs in Harry’s waistband and carefully pulled down. Harry’s cock popped free and bobbed between them, and he let the underpants fall to the floor before stepping out of them.

Draco sighed and muttered, “Figures.”

“What?” Harry asked as he reached for Draco and just as gently stripped him too, and was gratified to find Draco just as hard.

Draco shook his head. “Nothing.”

Harry couldn’t resist reaching out and giving Draco’s cock a few strokes, and nearly moaned aloud as Draco shivered and his hips bucked forward. His cock was just a little shorter than Harry’s, but noticeably thicker. Harry couldn’t wait to have that cock inside him, stretching him wide. He couldn’t wait to push his own cock into the tight heat of Draco’s body. He couldn’t wait to have Draco any way he could get him, in all the ways it was possible for one man to take or be taken by another.

Reluctantly, he let go of Draco and took a step back.

“I think we should continue things in the shower,” Harry said, reaching in and twisting the knobs.

He let his eyes roam unabashedly over Draco’s body as he waited for the water to heat, taking in the long lines and sharp angles that made up Draco Malfoy, the alabaster skin and lanky limbs and that wonderful tattoo, and yes, the scars. The burned and Marked forearm didn’t bother him overly much, but the stark white scars over Draco’s chest were harder to look at, and Harry made himself stare. He looked up to find Draco watching him uneasily, and Harry sighed. He stepped close and brushed his fingertips over Draco’s sternum as he kissed him softly. It was the closest to an apology that he thought Draco would let him get. Then he reached into the shower to test the water with one hand and, finding it warm enough, stepped inside. Draco joined him a moment later.

He nudged Draco to stand under the spray, and the sight of the water sluicing down his lithe body and darkening his hair to an unremarkable blond was nearly too much to handle. Draco flinched as Harry pressed him suddenly back against the cold tile of the shower wall, but didn’t complain as Harry kissed him deeply. His arms wound around Harry, holding tight, and their erections rubbed together. Draco whined deep in his throat, and the sound lit Harry’s arousal into something almost unbearable.

“Turn around,” he panted in Draco’s ear. “Please.”

Draco twisted in his arms, and Harry took a moment to line himself up against the cleft of Draco’s arse and thrust slowly, pressing hard against the slick skin, and he groaned as the head of his cock dragged over the hard ridge of Draco’s tailbone. Draco went tense at this new intimacy, and that was just not on. Harry wanted him breathless and whining again, so he reached around and wrapped his hand around Draco’s cock, stroking in time with the slow slide of his own cock against Draco’s arse.

“Stop that, you’re not…” Draco gasped and chased Harry’s hand away to replace it with his own. “You’re doing it wrong.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh at that and pressed a kiss to the side of Draco’s neck. “I’ll learn. I’ll learn everything you like.”

He put his mouth back against Draco’s neck and let his teeth scrape over the sensitive skin there. Draco moaned and let his head fall back, and his hand sped up as his hips rocked back against Harry. Harry shortened his thrusts so that the head of his cock bumped over Draco’s tailbone with every stroke, and *oh* that felt good. The warm wet skin of his arse, the soft whines that rose from his throat. All that pale skin beaded with water. That fucking tattoo on his side.

Harry’s orgasm caught him suddenly and he came hard, his arms squeezing around Draco’s middle, his toes curling against the porcelain bottom of the bathtub. When he recovered, Draco was still stroking himself, and Harry turned him roughly and knocked his hand away. Draco started to protest, but Harry dropped to his knees and licked a firm stripe up his shaft before swallowing as much as he could. There was a dull thunk as Draco’s head dropped back against the tiles and his hands fisted in Harry’s hair.

He couldn't help being disappointed that Draco didn't taste like himself. Harry thought fleetingly of that heavy, heady scent from earlier, but the shower had washed it away and now all he tasted was water. Tomorrow, or maybe even later today he'd do it again, and find out exactly how Draco tasted. He sucked harder, pulling back just enough to swipe his tongue over the head before taking him in again.

"Close, I'm close," Draco panted, and he tugged at Harry's hair, trying to pull him away.

Harry cupped Draco's arse in both palms and slid his mouth as far down Draco's cock as it would go, until his nose pressed against the blond curls at the base. In a few seconds the hands in his hair went from trying to pull him off to trying to pull him closer, as his cock pulsed against Harry's tongue and he came with a gasp. Harry swallowed and slowly pulled his mouth off Draco, licking him clean as he went.

"Fuck," Draco said breathlessly. "That was… Fuck."

Harry ran his hands up Draco's back as he stood, and made a face when his fingers encountered the gummy remains of his release. "You've got spunk on your back."

He thought Draco blushed, but it was hard to tell with his cheeks already pink from the shower. "It's your fault," he muttered.

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" Harry said and smiled because he'd very much enjoyed putting it there. He thought he'd enjoy getting rid of it, too. "Here, turn around."

Draco eyed him suspiciously. "I believe that's how it got there in the first place."

"I'm delighted you were paying attention, now turn around," Harry said.

Draco sighed and turned around. Harry soaped up his hands and then dragged them down Draco's back, pressing hard, and Draco let out a low moan that would have had Harry jumping him again if he hadn't just come. He rubbed his hands up and down Draco's back, loving the feel of soap-slicked skin beneath his palms, paying more attention to his shoulders because Draco moaned louder when he pressed there.

After he finished washing Draco, he soaped himself up and then Draco helped him rinse. His hands on Harry's body were hesitant, endearingly shy considering what they'd just done, and Harry thought his ribs might crack from the way his heart swelled when Draco smiled at him. He looked away and turned off the water.

Harry wrapped a towel around his waist while Draco cast a series of drying charms on his skin and hair, then bent over to snag a discarded pair of underpants from the floor.

Distracted by the lovely view of Draco's arse, it took Harry a moment to react. "Er, those are…"

"I know perfectly well what they are," Draco said, leaning over and pressing a brief kiss against Harry's lips. "See you at work, Potter."

He turned and sauntered out of the room, snitches fluttering madly on his bum.

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"You're late," Draco said when Harry walked in. "Four minutes."

Harry sighed. "Good morning to you too," he muttered, though his eyes did linger appreciatively over Draco's attire.

Draco had worn blue again today, the light blue button-down and bright cobalt waistcoat that always seemed to drive Harry to distraction. It wasn't his fault that the light blue of his shirt almost exactly matched the blue of his pilfered underpants; it was, however, a happy coincidence. He probably shouldn't have given into the temptation to steal those stupid underpants in the first place, but the look on Harry's face had certainly been worth it. And the secret knowledge that he was wearing the Chosen One's underthings made him feel a bit naughty… As did the knowledge that said Chosen One would likely be stripping them off him again after work.

Draco felt his cheeks grow warm at that thought and he quickly ducked his head back over his paperwork. He listened to the rustle of Harry taking off his Auror robes, which certainly didn't help his blushing, then heard Harry digging in his satchel and the soft murmur of a Finite. A moment later, Harry set a white box on his desk.

"What's this?" Draco asked as he folded back the cover to reveal a small array of Danishes nestled in parchment paper.

"Breakfast. There's strawberry, cheese, raspberry and chocolate. I didn't know which you liked best so I got one of each," Harry said with a small shrug. "I'll take whichever two you don't want."

I love you, Draco almost said, and then nearly bit through his tongue, because he *didn't* love Potter. It was just the last bit of the bond's influence, obviously just the bond, because it was far too soon for that. He'd only known Harry for… well, for thirteen years, but that's entirely beside the point. Clearly this wholly inappropriate impulse to profess his love for Harry was just the last remnant of yesterday's spell. And the fact that Draco felt a bit peckish, having skipped breakfast, and really did have a thing for cheese Danishes. It was just as likely he'd have almost said 'I love you,' to Weasley or even, Merlin forbid, *Smith*, if he'd been the one to bring Draco a cheese Danish.

Flustered, Draco lifted his head to Harry and found himself staring at that ridiculous cartoon mouth. His own mouth dropped open.

Harry smirked and brushed a speck of lint from his Rolling Stones shirt.

It turned out that irritation was just wonderful for getting rid of embarrassment. Draco met Harry's gaze and lifted his eyebrows. "Really, Potter?"

Harry raised his own eyebrows. “Snitch briefs,” he said.

Ah, so it was payback, then. True, Draco had started it, but at least Harry didn’t have to spend his whole day staring at his purloined underpants. Draco would see that shirt every time he looked up, and every time he did he knew he’d remember last night. Also, that mouth hadn’t gotten any less creepy despite the good things Draco now associated it with.

“I assure you that I haven’t any idea what you’re talking about,” he muttered as he took the cheese Danish from the box and set it on his saucer, then let his hand hover over the other three for a long moment before taking the raspberry one as well.

Harry made a little hum of approval as he reached for the box. “Good, you left the chocolate one.”

Draco couldn’t help but smile. “Cheese is my favorite. For future reference,” he said, and bit into his Danish.

Harry’s gaze followed the path of his tongue as Draco licked a bit of icing from his upper lip, then he visibly snapped himself out of it and retreated behind his own desk, diligently keeping his eyes away from Draco’s side of the room. Amused, Draco turned his own eyes back to the folders before him and settled in to take care of his paperwork.

He filled out and submitted his incident report for yesterday’s events and looked over a list of suspects for what happened at the Lestrange estate. The name Malfoy was conspicuously absent from the list, but Draco knew they’d only taken him off before they sent it for him to look over, and he’d be added right back on as soon as he sent it back. All of the other names were familiar to him, mostly family members of convicted Death Eaters or people who’d been involved in the Death Eater movement but who’d never received Marks. Draco added a few more names to the bottom, then dropped it into his Outbox where it disappeared with a small pop.

Draco glanced up at where Harry sat across the room, idly rubbing the feathery tip of his quill over his lips as he scanned the file in front of him, and for a moment all Draco could do was remember what it felt like to have those lips fastened firmly around his cock. A warm surge of arousal made his breath catch for a moment, and he quickly pushed the memory – sweet Merlin, the *memory*, not a fantasy but a *memory* – away and tried to turn his attention back to the paperwork before him.

He had a feeling this would be a very long day.

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“Did you hear what happened yesterday?” Ron asked around a mouthful of sandwich. He leaned a little closer to be heard over the muffled roar of conversation in the crowded

restaurant they'd picked for lunch. "I think maybe you'd gone home by that point. I heard about the Fiendfyre thing."

Harry absolutely did not want to talk about the Fiendfyre thing. "No, what happened yesterday?" He took a sip of water.

Ron swallowed and wiped his fingers on a crumpled paper napkin before he continued. "Some arsehole completely trashed the Ministry's wards yesterday."

Harry choked as some of the water went down the wrong pipe, and Ron reached across the table to give him a good wallop between the shoulderblades as he coughed and sputtered. Harry waved him away and took a few slow, deep breaths. "Er, no. I hadn't heard anything about that," he managed. "Um. Did they find out who did it?"

Ron shook his head. "No. The wards were so damaged they couldn't even track who'd come and gone around that time. The Unspeakables were there half the night getting them back up, from what I hear."

"Oh," Harry said, trying to not let his relief show. "That's… good." He took another bite of his sandwich. "Do they have any suspects?"

Ron shrugged. "No idea. The Unspeakables are handling it all, but from what I hear it doesn't look too good."

"Oh," Harry said again. "Well. That's good." Ron gave him an odd look, and Harry added cheerfully, "I mean, that the Unspeakables are on it. I'm sure they'll get it sorted." He took another bite.

They ate in silence for a while, and Harry thought back over yesterday's events, and about the conversation he'd had in Kingsley's office.

"Ron," he said and brushed crumbs from his fingertips. "Have you noticed anything different about how Kingsley's been acting lately?"

"How do you mean?" Ron asked with a frown. "I haven't noticed anything off."

Harry ate the last of his chips and chewed quickly. "It's about Draco, mostly." He nudged his plate aside and leaned over the table toward Ron, lowering his voice as he continued. "He won't listen to me whenever I try to prove that it wasn't Draco. At first it sort of made sense, given his history with the Malfoys and the war and all, and it did look fairly bad for Draco, having his partners die like that. But now…" He sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. "It's like he's already decided Draco's guilty and the rest is just details."

"He must have his reasons for it," Ron said slowly, then cut Harry off when he tried to protest. "I know you're convinced he's innocent, but it's not like Shacklebolt to focus on someone like he's doing with Malfoy if he doesn't have a reason for it."

"I know," Harry said with a sigh. "It's just… it seems off, to me."

"If you think something's wrong, why don't you tell someone?"

“Who am I going to tell? He’s the Head Auror, it’s not like I can go over his head for this,” Harry said.

“Unless you go to the Minister,” Ron pointed out.

“And tell him *what*? That Kingsley suspects an ex-Death Eater of committing murder? And that I think Draco Malfoy is an innocent victim of circumstance?” Harry wadded up his paper napkin and dropped it onto the tabletop. “Anyone’s going to assume that Kingsley’s got it right and there’s something wrong with *me*. And I don’t have any proof that something’s wrong with Kingsley.” He slid his fingertips under his glasses to rub at his eyes. “It’s just a feeling.”

Ron scooted his chair a little closer. “I’ll look into it,” he said. “I’ll ask around and see what I can find out. You need to tell Malfoy what’s going on. That there’s evidence someone’s targeting his partners.”

“I can’t,” Harry sighed. “He’ll lose his shit over it. He’ll go straight to Kingsley and try to get me removed as his partner. And either Kingsley will take that as more evidence that he’s guilty, or he’ll get his way and I’ll be reassigned. Ron, I can’t let that happen. At this point I’m his only chance at being proved innocent. As far as he knows, what happened at the Lestrange estate happened because I’m Harry Potter, not because I’m Draco’s partner. I need him to keep believing that until some new evidence turns up.”

For a long moment, Ron just watched him. “I don’t like that you’re using yourself as bait like this,” he said. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Harry nodded. “Of course I do.” He thought maybe he should be more concerned with the fact that someone was actively trying to kill him, but he couldn’t bring himself to be overly worried about it. He’d had someone trying to kill him his whole life. If even Voldemort hadn’t succeeded, Harry was sure that no one else would either.

Ron sighed. “I’ll let you know as soon as I find anything. If there really is something wrong with Shacklebolt, and we don’t know who’s involved, then it’ll look better if you’re not poking around and asking questions. Stick close to Malfoy, and leave the rest to me.” He pushed his chair back and stood. “We’d better head back now. I know how Malfoy gets his knickers in a twist if you’re even two minutes late.”

The inappropriate image of Draco’s arse clad in snitch-patterned pants flashed unbidden into his mind. And despite everything, Harry couldn’t help but smile.

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The afternoon passed quickly in a blur of paperwork, broken up only by a short trip over to Mrs. Dodson’s where they spent half an hour searching for a small gold pair of sewing scissors. Draco didn’t tell her anything about Harry, but he didn’t have to. She took one look

between them and gave Draco a knowing little smile. She served both the ginger biscuits and the chocolate ones with their tea.

After work, they stopped off for Thai before going back to Harry's flat, and the first thing Draco did after the bedroom door shut behind them was to yank that stupid shirt off Harry and ball it up and throw it into a corner where, with luck, it'd be forgotten entirely. Harry only laughed and set about reclaiming his snitch pants before he gave Draco the second blowjob of his life, and it was even better than the first one because this time Draco was stretched out on Harry's bed and could just lie back and enjoy it without worrying about whether his knees would buckle from the sheer overload of sensation, and whether he'd crack his skull on the bathtub if that happened.

When he got his breath back, he looked over to find Harry still hard. "So, do you want me to…?" He couldn't work out how to finish the sentence without resorting to a crude euphemism, so he gestured vaguely at Harry's groin.

Harry just smiled and turned onto his back and said, "Please."

He let Draco set his own pace, exploring hesitantly at first. It took Draco a second or two to make himself take Harry's cock into his mouth, but once he did it really wasn't so bad. Harry tasted warm and musky, oddly earthy, but pleasantly so. Draco found he rather liked it. He took his time, licking and sucking his way up and down the shaft, swiping his tongue over the head, and letting the soft noises Harry made guide his actions. He discovered that Harry liked when Draco let the head rub firmly over the roof of his mouth, and that scraping his nails lightly down the inside of Harry's thighs made his hips jerk off the mattress.

When Harry came a few minutes later, even though he gave warning, Draco still nearly choked on it. It didn't taste good at all, horribly sharp and bitter, and he coughed, and a little of it dribbled down his chin. He swallowed hard.

"Ugh," he said and swiped at his chin with the back of his wrist.

Harry chuckled sleepily and drew him back up the bed. "If you take me in as far as you can when I come, you can swallow most of it without tasting. Takes a bit of practice to figure out, but I'm not adverse to that," he murmured, then added, "You missed some," and sucked lightly on Draco's chin.

Draco could feel his cheeks grow warm. "That's disgusting, Potter."

Harry nudged him in the ribs, and the dragon tattoo arched its spine and stretched its wings. "It's just spunk."

"Yes, your own. And please don't call it that. I find that word horribly vulgar." He sounded unbearably prim even to his own ears. Merlin knew what Harry must think of him.

"What, spunk?" Damn him, Harry just looked amused.

"Yes. Please, there's plenty of more pleasant euphemisms for it."

Harry shifted so he could kiss Draco, his tongue stroking firmly into Draco's mouth. Draco could taste his own release there, still sharp and bitter but slightly different, and he knew Harry could taste himself on Draco. A sharp flare of arousal rushed through him, blending with the lingering embarrassment and faint disbelief that he'd really just sucked Harry Potter's cock.

"There's plenty of worse ones, too," Harry whispered against Draco's lips, then grinned. "You know, it's sort of cute how self-conscious you are about all this."

"It's wonderful to know that my embarrassment is a source of amusement for you," Draco grumbled.

Harry propped himself up on one elbow. "There's nothing embarrassing about it, Draco."

Draco huffed. "And I told you, it's not something purebloods really discuss." He flicked a glance at Harry, who, damn him, was still watching him with an amused little smile. "It's considered crude," he insisted.

"Well I hope you get over that soon," Harry said, kissing Draco gently to take the sting from his words. "Because I'm not like that at all. I mean, it's just sex."

Draco didn't quite agree with that. He felt like nothing with Harry would ever be *just* anything. He didn't say anything as he reached down to tug the bed sheet up to his waist.

With a kick of one foot, Harry wrenched the sheet off him. "Really, Draco. You've got nothing to be shy about," he said, letting his gaze sweep brazenly over Draco's body.

Draco grabbed for the sheet again. "I had that over me because I'm cold, you berk, not because I'm shy. And anyhow, you're already intimately acquainted with everything I've got."

Harry's hot gaze raked down Draco's body again as one of his hands cupped Draco's arse. "Not as intimately as I'd like to be."

Draco glared at him. "Merlin, where did all this come from anyhow? Just last week you were stuttering and blushing if I so much as looked at you and now suddenly you're some sort of Casanova."

"Casanova wasn't gay," Harry pointed out as he flopped back on the pillows and tugged Draco down with him. "It's different now. I know where I stand with you. Before, I didn't know how you felt." He let out a slow, contented breath that ruffled Draco's hair. "It's funny that you're the complete opposite. You've been flirting with me for weeks, and suddenly you're all awkward about it."

Draco went silent for a few beats. "Because now I know how you feel about me," he said, then admitted quietly, "And I don't want to fuck it up."

"Draco, you won't," Harry assured him. "You and I, we fit together. We always have, I think." He let out a long, slow breath. "You know, I think maybe this explains my obsession

with you in school. Maybe it was really attraction and I just had no idea what to do with it back then."

"Don't," Draco said, a little sharper than he'd intended. He softened his voice. "Don't do that."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Do what?"

"Try to rewrite the past to suit the present. I know you didn't like me much at all back then, and Merlin knows I didn't give you much reason to. And I hated you too. And then I got to know you, and I got over it." Draco let his fingertips trail up Harry's arm from his elbow to his shoulder. "A lot of terrible things have happened to both of us, and we've both made mistakes. It's over and done with now and can't be changed. But it also made us who we are today." He linked his fingers through Harry's and gave them a squeeze. "It makes *us* who we are today."

Harry sighed. "I guess you're right. But still, there's a lot of years where we could have been shagging."

"There's a lot of years ahead of us for that," Draco said with a small smile.

"Mmm," Harry hummed. "I suppose that just means we'll have to make up for lost time."

A small flutter of something trembled through Draco's stomach, and he couldn't quite tell whether it was anxiety or excitement at the thought of shagging Harry. "Are we going to…?"

"What, fuck?" Harry paused and Draco nodded. "No, not right now. This weekend, I think. I mean, I'd like to do it now. But I think that once I do I'll want to spend as much time in bed with you as I can. Two days sounds like it might be enough to start with. Unless…" He nuzzled against Draco's throat. "I don't suppose I can convince you to call off work tomorrow?"

"Absolutely not," Draco said with a laugh. "If you're determined to keep me in bed for two days straight you'll just have to wait until this weekend, I'm afraid."

Harry kissed him lightly. "Don't bother making other plans," he said with a cheeky grin. "You're all mine until Monday."

****

By Friday morning, Harry was nearing the end of his resolve. Lying curled together in bed earlier that week, still sleepy and blissful from his orgasm, waiting until the weekend to have sex with Draco had sounded like a brilliant plan. They'd have forty-eight wonderfully uninterrupted hours to explore each other, and Harry had pictured them lounging in his bed all weekend, talking about anything and everything when they weren't dozing between bouts of fantastic sex. As much as he wanted Draco, it'd be utterly worth it to put it off until the

weekend. And besides, it'd been *months* since the last time he'd been intimate with anything other than his own hand. He could stand to wait a few more days.

He hadn't counted on Draco being a complete fucking tease.

Since their little talk on Wednesday, Draco had taken Harry's request about not being embarrassed to heart and had gone back to his maddeningly flirtatious ways, making sly little comments and taking any excuse to get himself close to Harry.

Like right now, for example.

It was just before nine in the morning and they were currently in Conference Room Two with a dozen other Aurors involved in the Verve case, laying plans for stakeouts of three likely sale points. Neither Harry nor Draco would be taking part in said stakeouts, but they were allowed to assist in the planning. Harry had sketched out a loose plan for one of the locations on a sheet of parchment, and Draco had come up behind him to get a better look at it.

He stood entirely too close, one hand braced against the edge of the table while the other lay along the back of Harry's chair while he leaned over Harry's shoulder, ostensibly to get a better look at Harry's sketch. Which, if he'd wanted a closer look, Harry would've been more than happy to just hand him the bloody thing. It would have been better than this, sitting frozen and trapped with Draco so near that he could feel the warmth of him, their cheeks nearly brushing, and Harry could smell the peppermint tea Draco had been drinking that morning on every exhale. If he turned his head just a little he could kiss him, swipe his tongue along Draco's bottom lip until it opened for him and he could taste the peppermint for himself… Abruptly, he caught himself leaning closer, dangerously near closing those few inches between them.

Oh god, this had to stop. As subtly as he could, Harry dug his elbow into Draco's side. Under the guise of shifting his stance slightly, Draco kicked him in the ankle. Then, damn him, he let the hand on the back of Harry's chair slip forward just a little, and he rubbed his thumb along Harry's spine.

Harry shoved his chair back, nearly knocking Draco over. "Need the toilet," he mumbled and fled the room.

"Must have been something he ate," he heard Draco say innocently and Harry threw him a sour look over his shoulder, that absolute bastard, because Draco knew full well that the last thing Harry had put in his mouth that morning had been Draco's cock.

In the gents, Harry splashed his face with cold water and took deep breaths to calm himself down. He'd come close to kissing Draco. At work. In front of a dozen other Aurors. He'd obviously lost his fucking *mind*. And it was all Draco's fault. He was starting to see Draco's point about drawing a line between their personal and professional interactions and staying the hell away from it, because with Draco pushing the boundary now, Harry was beginning to worry about slipping up. Like he almost had in that conference room. God, sometimes he felt like it was so bloody obvious what was going on between the two of them, the way he sometimes couldn't keep his gaze from heating when he watched Draco, or the sly smile that

played along Draco's mouth when he caught Harry's eye, or the warmth in his voice when he said his name.

Harry scowled at himself in the mirror. "Pull yourself together, Potter," he muttered. "You brought down Voldemort. You can handle one stupid blond git."

He went back to Conference Room Two, claimed a seat on the other side of the room, and managed to ignore Draco for the rest of the meeting.

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It was early in the evening, barely past eight o'clock and already Draco had grown tired of his colleagues. He'd grown spoiled in just a few short days, used to going straight back to Harry's flat after stopping off for dinner somewhere and then having Harry all to himself. He glanced over his shoulder at where Harry stood across the room, chatting idly about the Verve case with one of the other Aurors assigned to it. Draco had more than had enough of that case, what with a three-bloody-hour meeting that morning, during most of which he'd entertained himself by trying to fluster Harry, which had been fun up until Harry had left the room, then claimed the seat next to Weasley when he returned.

Draco sighed into his pint glass, then drained the last inch of ale and gestured to the bartender for another. He'd sipped away about a third of it when Harry came up and tapped him on the shoulder to catch his attention.

"Something's just occurred to me," Harry said.

Draco took a sip of his pint. "Hm?"

"It's Friday, after work," he said and paused, raising his eyebrows significantly. "By my reckoning, that makes it officially the weekend."

Draco could feel his cheeks go hot as Harry's meaning sunk in. He took another slow sip of his pint. "I suppose you're right."

Harry leaned closer. "Shall we get out of here?" he said in Draco's ear.

"Yes," Draco said, abandoning his pint glass on a nearby table. The table's occupants glanced curiously at him. "Absolutely."

"Great," Harry said and tossed back the rest of his drink. "Let's say our goodbyes."

"Wait." Draco tugged on Harry's arm to stop him as he turned toward Weasley's table. "We can't leave together, they'll be suspicious."

Harry rolled his eyes. "We've been leaving together for weeks now. I think they'd be more suspicious if we suddenly left separately, don't you?"

And Draco couldn't quite argue with that so he tagged along as Harry made his goodbyes in record time, and they left the pub together.

Outside in the cool air and quiet and darkness, it all felt very real, what they were going home to do, and a nervous tremble of excitement started up in Draco's belly. He glanced at Harry, who gave him a crooked smile and a conspiratorial wink, and Draco felt that tremble increase. He felt, rather ridiculously, the same way he had when he used to sneak about after curfew back at Hogwarts, nervous from doing something he shouldn't and excited because breaking the rules was half the fun.

It'd been a long time since he'd broken rules.

Impulsively, he caught Harry by the elbow and crowded up him against a lamppost they were just passing, catching Harry's mouth with his own and swallowing down the small noise of surprise he made. And it was just as brilliant as he'd thought it'd be, when Harry snogged him back and his arms went around Draco, and he spread his legs just enough for Draco to press one thigh against his groin. Draco held his hips so tight he thought he might leave bruises, and Harry knotted one hand in his hair.

"What was that all about?" Harry asked when they finally parted.

Draco grinned at him. "I've been wanting to do that for ages," he said. "Since the first pub night."

Harry caught his hand and gave his fingers a squeeze. "You can do that whenever you'd like."

And Draco could only keep grinning like a loon because it was true.

They made it back to Harry's flat without Apparating, and Draco was glad of that. Even though it took far longer, there was something wonderfully rousing about letting the anticipation build with every step, every glance Draco sneaked at Harry's face, every smile they shared and the warm pressure of Harry's palm against his own.

Soon they stood in front of Harry's door, and Harry slid his key into the lock, and Draco had just enough time to worry that this is where it'd get awkward before Harry was on him, kissing him frantically and walking him backward to the bedroom where he Vanished all of their clothing with a wordless, wandless spell that set Draco's blood alight, and pressed him back onto the bed.

He'd thought of this before, of course he had, and had especially thought of it since this whole thing with Harry had started up, albeit with only a vague curiosity about how it'd actually happen because when he thought about sex, he thought of himself as the one doing the shagging. But when Harry brushed his fingers over the curve of his arse and said simply, "Please," in a soft, almost reverent way, like he knew he was asking for the moon, well. How could Draco say no? He'd have given Harry the moon itself and all the stars to boot, were it in his power to do so.

So that was how he'd ended up on his back with Harry's warm mouth engulfing his prick and two fingers up his arse.

Draco didn't expected to like it nearly as much as he did, especially when Harry slid in the first finger. It felt awkward, with him flushed and embarrassed by how private this moment felt, almost like he should be alone for it rather than sharing it with someone else. Draco stared at the ceiling and tried to focus on anything but the strange sensation of that finger inside him. But when Harry added a second finger and the dull burning pain grew to just this side of right, Draco couldn't help his eyes sliding shut, couldn't stop the half-desperate whine that rose from the back of his throat, couldn't keep his legs from spreading farther as his back arched, eagerly seeking *more*.

This felt so intensely intimate, and didn't it just figure that Harry Potter would be the one to breach him like this, to coax him open and push his way inside and make Draco fall apart entirely. He'd always been able to get to Draco in a way that no one else had even come close to, and the only thing that had changed was the way he went about it. Draco had to say, he much preferred this way compared to how they'd needled each other in their youth.

Then Harry touched something in him that sent a white-hot bolt of pleasure sizzling up his spine, and Draco couldn't stop himself from wailing as his hips jerked up. Harry kept prodding at that place and wrapped one hand around base of Draco's cock so Draco didn't choke him with it, and let Draco thrust into his mouth. Sensation mounted until he became a shivering whimpering wreck and he absolutely didn't *care*, and then his orgasm blossomed slowly, deep in his belly, leaving Draco balanced on the knife-edge of pleasure for one long crystalline moment, and then it shattered and so did Draco.

When he came back to himself, Harry had crawled back up the bed to flop down beside him, one arm flung haphazardly over Draco's chest as he nuzzled against Draco's shoulder, pressing slow, open-mouthed kisses over Draco's heated skin.

"Did you need me to take care of you?" Draco asked.

"No, I already came," Harry replied.

Draco sighed. "Good, because I don't think I can move."

They lay together in silence for a few long drowsy minutes.

"So, will you be all right with bottoming?" Harry asked. "If you'd like me to do it, I can." He nibbled lightly at Draco's shoulder.

Draco shrugged away from him; Harry's mouth on his skin made it very hard to think. "Which would you prefer?"

"In general, I like topping more than bottoming," he said. "That's not to say I don't like bottoming, just that I like it the other way a little more." He grinned at Draco. "Except when I've been drinking. I really like bottoming when I'm drunk. Fair warning on that."

“All right, then,” Draco said. “I suppose I’m…” He paused, swallowed, and forced himself to say it aloud. “I’ll bottom for you.”

“But not yet,” Harry murmured, snuggling close.

“Mmm,” Draco agreed, letting his eyes fall shut. “In a while.”

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They dozed on and off for a couple of hours, lying half-tangled together and touching each other with gentle, languid strokes, fingertips tracing lightly over smooth stretches of skin, along lines and curves as if memorizing every inch. Harry slowly kissed his way up Draco’s neck before capturing his lips in a leisurely snog. The kiss heated little by little until they were gasping into each other’s mouths, hands clutching, hips rocking together, and it struck Harry that this was it, this was finally it, and the thought of what they were about to do made him suddenly giddy.

And then Draco abruptly pushed him away.

“I’m not him,” he said, sudden and defiant.

Harry blinked muzzily, entirely thrown off course. They’d been snogging and now Draco was glaring at him. “What? You’re not who?”

“*Him*,” Draco said. “Your David. I’m not him.” He sucked in a shaky breath. “I know that you… cared for him. And that you two only just broke up. I won’t be his replacement. If we’re going to do this, I need to know that you’re doing it with *me*.”

His chin was up, his eyes glittering dangerously, and he looked so Malfoy-ish that Harry felt the old familiar urge to push him back, and to see how far he could keep pushing before Draco snapped. The urge dissipated in an instant, replaced by the knowledge that it was Draco’s insecurity that had him wrapping his pride around himself like a shield. Gently, Harry slid a hand through blond hair until his fingers curled around the back of Draco’s neck.

“I know this is you,” he said firmly, drawing Draco closer. “And I know who you are.”

Their lips met, and Harry kept the kiss soft, kept his fingers gentle as he tried to say ‘I want this,’ and ‘I want you,’ with every caress, every swipe of his tongue, every press of his body against Draco’s. It felt strange to restrain himself, to force himself to be gentle when everything between the two of them had always been passion and conflict.

Only a few minutes passed before Draco pushed him away again. “You needn’t treat me so delicately,” he snapped. He was glaring again. “I’m not some blushing virgin in need of deflowering.”

Right now, Draco was blushing, and he was technically a virgin, and Harry absolutely had every intention of 'deflowering' him, but he knew better than to say any of that aloud.

So Harry snorted and nudged him in the ribs and said, "You're an infuriating git that I mean to shag. Will you shut up and let me get on with it?"

"You're an arsehole," Draco said.

Harry only grinned. "Takes one to know one," he replied and pinched Draco's bum.

Draco grabbed him by the wrist and wrestled his hand away, and Harry bit at Draco's bottom lip and fought back, and *this* felt right. Half struggle and half snogging, this felt both brand new and achingly familiar and Harry kept it up until he'd grown fully hard again. He pulled back from Draco, who lay flushed and panting, sprawled across Harry's sheets.

For a moment he couldn't believe what he was about to do, and couldn't believe that Draco was going to let him.

He reached for the small bottle of lubricant he'd left on the nightstand and used it to slick his fingers before he took up the same position he'd used to prepare Draco earlier – sprawled on his stomach between Draco's legs – and eased his index finger inside as he nipped at Draco's hipbone. Draco was still a little loose from before and his finger slid in with the barest resistance. Drawing back, he pressed in with his middle finger as well, stroking gently until Draco's hips began to rise to meet each thrust. Harry pulled free just long enough to drizzle more lube over his fingers and capture Draco's prick with his mouth before he pressed inside with three fingers.

Draco's hips stilled and he made a soft sound of discomfort, so Harry kept his fingers motionless, letting Draco's body adjust, and did his best to distract him from the pain of it with a slow, even suction that soon had Draco writhing beneath him again. Slowly, Harry stroked his fingers inside Draco, the muscles of his arse clenched so tight around them that they mashed uncomfortably together, and all he could think of was that in a few short minutes he'd be inside that. He kept it up until Draco relaxed and the overwhelming pressure eased somewhat, then withdrew his fingers and scooted up the mattress.

He slapped the side of Draco's arse. "Lift up," he said.

Draco obediently lifted his bum off the bed and Harry jammed a pillow under the small of his back before he reached again for the bottle on the nightstand and poured a puddle of lubricant into his palm. He stroked his prick to coat it before he climbed atop Draco and carefully positioned himself at his entrance.

"Ready?" he asked

Harry expected a pithy reply, maybe a sharp retort, but Draco only watched him with dark, trusting eyes and nodded once, his mouth pressed into a thin line. Harry kissed him, and felt those taut lips soften and open beneath his own as he tilted his hips forward and pressed slowly inside, easing in a little at a time until he was fully seated.

Breaking the kiss, Harry pressed his face against Draco's neck and held himself perfectly still, both to give Draco's body the time to become accustomed to him, and because he thought that if he moved at all he'd come right then and there. Even without moving, it was a near thing, with Draco's body so hot and tight around his prick, Draco's inner muscles twitching faintly as he shifted slightly beneath him.

"All right?" Harry asked when Draco sighed and put his arms around Harry.

Draco nodded jerkily. "Yeah. It's just… weird."

"Good weird or bad weird?" Harry's arms were beginning to tremble from the effort of holding himself motionless above Draco. He was aching with the urge to slam himself in, to thrust and thrust into Draco as hard as he could.

"Good weird. Definitely good," Draco said with a small and breathless laugh. "I'm fine, Potter. You can move now."

Harry kissed Draco briefly, then slid out and back in while watching for any signs of pain. Draco gave a soft moan and clasped his arms tighter around Harry's back. Encouraged, Harry thrust a bit harder again, then again, and Draco's hips rocked up to meet the motion.

"Brilliant, you're so brilliant," Harry murmured, already lost.

Draco answered him with a long, low groan. Harry thrust harder and turned his head enough to press a kiss to Draco's temple, and his nose bumped awkwardly against Draco's head. Draco whimpered his name, and Harry kissed him again. Draco turned his head and fastened his mouth to Harry's neck, sucking hard, and Harry didn't even care that he'd likely end up with a lovebite because it just felt so fucking good. He felt his orgasm rising, slow but relentless, and he groped between them and grasped Draco's prick. His hand was still slippery with lubricant from when he'd prepared himself and he stroked roughly.

"Oh Merlin, Potter, yes!" Draco gasped out.

His nails raked down Harry's back and Harry moaned. "Draco, please. Oh god, Draco, please." He couldn't hold out much longer and he wanted Draco to come first. His steady rhythm sped up, and Harry was helpless to slow it as he slammed into Draco, hard and fast. A distant corner of his mind wanted to slow down, make it last longer, but it'd been so long since he'd shagged anyone, though he didn't think anything could have prepared him for this. Harry thought that the mere fact it was *Draco Malfoy* underneath him made all the difference, that it was Draco's hot breath panting against his neck, that it was Draco's arse hot and tight around Harry's cock, and for an instant Harry couldn't help but regret all those years they'd wasted by fighting with each other when they could have been doing this, because *this* was fucking brilliant.

And then Draco cried out, his back bowing as he arched off the bed, trapping Harry's hand between their stomachs. Harry squeezed his fingers and oh thank god, Draco's cock pulsed in his hand as his passage spasmed around Harry's prick and that was it. Harry came explosively, his whole body pulling so tense that he couldn't even cry out, his hips twitching helplessly forward.

He had the presence of mind to pull free of Draco and flop over beside him rather than collapsing atop him. His whole body felt loose and warm and he couldn't remember ever feeling better than he did right now, lying in bed with Draco and waiting for his hammering pulse to return to normal.

Beside him, Draco lay sprawled on his back, his scarred forearm pressed over his eyes. "I can't believe I just had sex with Harry Potter," he said with a breathless little laugh.

Harry grinned and rolled over onto his side, trailing his fingers lightly up Draco's ribs so that the dragon tattoo stretched and flicked its tail. "I can't believe you let me."

"That was…" Draco sounded as if he still hadn't quite got his breath back. "I can't even come up with words for what that was."

Harry chuckled as he pressed a kiss to Draco's shoulder. "It's only going to get better, you know."

"I can't imagine it getting any better than that. I think I'll die if it gets any better than that." He paused and lifted his arm to peek at Harry. "Does it really?"

"Oh yes. This was just our first time." A rush of nervous warmth swept through him at his words. *Our first time*. He'd just fucked Draco Malfoy and if he had his way about it, he'd do it a thousand times more. "Just wait until we really get to know each other. Until I learn your body, what you like and don't like. How you move." He scraped his teeth along Draco's shoulder and Draco shivered. "What makes you scream."

"And you knew David that way?" Draco asked, his voice quiet and stiff, then he sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't… I've no reason to be jealous. I just don't share well, is all."

"Really, I didn't know that about you," Harry said dryly.

"Shut it, you." Draco put his arm back over his eyes.

Part of Harry wanted to just let it go. Rather a large part of him, to be honest. But in the end he couldn't because even if he didn't answer, the question would still be there, a small grain of insecurity that chafed until it became a festering issue. And Harry understood, he really did, because it was so incredibly intoxicating to look at Draco and know that he was the only person in the entire world to see him this undone. If someone else had known him this way first, especially if that other person had only just gone out of his life, well, Harry thought he'd probably be a little insecure too.

The only way out of this was complete honesty.

"Yes."

"What?"

"Yes," he said. "I did know him that well. We were together for years, on and off. Of course I did."

“Oh.” Draco sounded very small, like he hadn’t really wanted an answer to his question and now that he’d gotten one he had no idea what to do with it.

Harry propped himself up on an elbow and reached over to tug Draco’s arm away from his face. “You know how I told you about my book?”

Draco frowned at him. “The one you’ve lent me?”

“Yes. I’ve read it hundreds of times. I probably know it better than my own face in the mirror. I know every character, every action, every line of dialogue. I know every dog-eared page, every crease in the spine, every fold in the cover.” Harry rolled onto Draco in one swift motion, pinning him to the bed, pressing his face so close to Draco’s that their noses brushed. “*That’s* how well I want to know your body. That’s how well I want to know you.”

Draco swallowed, his eyes big and dark and very close, and Harry could feel the words against his lips as he said, “That sounds as if it will take quite a long time.”

“I imagine it will,” Harry said. “Years, in fact.”

“Maybe even decades,” Draco said softly.

Harry hesitated, because he didn’t think they were just talking about sex anymore. “Maybe,” he said, and somehow kept his voice steady even though his pulse hammered through his veins. “Maybe it’ll take me the rest of my life.”

Draco kissed him hard.

Chapter 12

It had been three weeks since they'd gotten together, three wonderful brilliant weeks in Harry's opinion. They'd fallen quickly into a routine, working through the day as normal, then going back to Harry's flat together where they'd shag like bunnies and Draco would spend the night. In the morning, he'd stop by his own place to shower and change clothes before meeting Harry at work. The only day they spent apart was Sunday, when, after a long and lazy morning of more sex, Draco would go have lunch with his parents and Harry would go over to The Burrow for a while. Sunday evening he'd spend catching up on all the errands and chores he'd neglected during the week, and by Monday morning he'd be itching to see Draco again.

Harry glanced up from his paperwork at Draco, who shuffled through the folders on his desk with a slight frown creasing his forehead. His glasses had slipped down his nose a little, and as Harry watched he nudged them back into place with one elegant fingertip.

And all Harry could think of was how earlier that morning he'd taken Draco on his hands and knees, and how when he finished and pulled out, he couldn't resist sliding a finger back inside Draco, finding him loose and slippery with lube and Harry's own come, and even though Harry had just finished he was already eagerly thinking of next time.

He'd never wanted anyone like this before, not even as a teen with his hormones running wild. He'd never experienced this constant and all-consuming need, something not helped by the fact that he had to stare at Draco all day and pretend he didn't feel anything. Like right now, with Draco sitting there at his desk, buried in his work, looking handsome and composed and unattainable, and all Harry really wanted to do was tear those fancy clothes off him and put him over his desk and make him fall apart.

It was a brilliant idea and Draco would never ever go for it.

Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained and all that.

"Um, Draco?"

"Hm?" Draco looked up, and his eyes narrowed a second later as he took in the expression on Harry's face. "No, Potter." He returned to his paperwork.

"What, I didn't even say anything!" Harry protested.

Draco didn't bother to look up again as he rifled through a folder. "I know what that look means, and it's not going to happen. We're at work."

"It's nearly lunch," Harry pointed out hopefully. "We could—"

Draco snapped the folder shut and dropped it atop a growing stack to his left. "It's been three hours since this morning. Can you really not control yourself for three hours?" He took off his glasses and dropped them on top of the folder.

“Well…”

Draco rolled his eyes and stood. “I’m going to go see if any new assignments have come in for us and pick up the next batch of customer records for the Verve case. And you…” He stabbed an elegant finger in Harry’s direction, the same one he’d used to push his glasses back into place. “You should go take a walk if you can’t restrain your urges.”

Harry sighed as the door shut behind Draco. He’d known that he wouldn’t go for it, but it was worth a try. He thought about taking Draco’s advice and going for a short walk, but in the end he looked down at the customer files spread over his desk and tried to force himself to focus.

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Harry sighed again and Draco nearly hexed him for it. He’d been worse than useless all day and it was fraying Draco’s last nerve. The sighing itself wasn’t that unusual, but usually Harry began an hour or so before they went home together, along with the heated glances that let Draco know exactly what he was imagining. But today he’d started up with them mid-morning and hadn’t quit, and throughout the day Draco’s concentration has steadily deteriorated, along with his resolve.

Bloody hell, if he didn’t do something about it then neither one of them would get anything done for the rest of the day.

“For fuck’s sake, Potter,” he spat when Harry sighed again. “Fine, all right? Fine!” He stood up and stalked around his desk. “I can’t believe I’m doing this. Get over here.”

He didn’t need to say anything more than that. Harry had rounded his desk in the blink of an eye and veritably attacked him, forcing their mouths together as he slammed Draco against the wall. The back of Draco’s head narrowly missed one of the coat hooks and he shuddered and pushed his hands under Harry’s tee-shirt as Harry yanked at the buttons on his waistcoat, then quickly abandoned them in favor of fumbling at Draco’s belt buckle. He got it open and dropped to his knees.

“What are you…?” Draco managed, still reeling from the intensity of their kissing.

“Going to suck your cock,” Harry said as he popped open the buttons at Draco’s fly.

“But what about you? I thought you…”

“I’ll get to that,” he said and looked up at Draco with a mischievous grin. “Getting you off is foreplay for me.”

“Well,” Draco said faintly. “I suppose I can’t bring myself to complain about that.”

And then Harry fastened that clever mouth of his around Draco’s cock and Draco’s brain stopped working. His left hand groped for and found the coat hook beside his head and clung

to it while his right hand tangled in Harry's hair, urging *closer* and *more*. Harry gave it his all and Draco barely lasted a couple of minutes. Instead of taking him all the way in, Harry pulled off so that his lips wrapped around the head of Draco's cock when he came, and he didn't swallow. Instead, he stood and spat Draco's load into his hand, and used it to slick his own cock.

"Want to come while kissing you," he said, Draco's come squelching obscenely between his fingers as he wanked himself with long, firm strokes, and Draco had no idea why he found that nearly as arousing as he did.

"You're a strange one, Potter," Draco murmured and caught Harry's mouth with his own.

He could taste his release on Harry's tongue as they snogged, the kiss heating as Harry's hand on his cock sped up. Then he gasped into Draco's mouth and Draco felt him shudder against him as come spurted over his fingers. Harry broke the kiss and nuzzled against Draco's neck.

"You're wonderful," he said, his voice warm and drowsy. "Clean us up?"

Draco cast the spells and they moved apart to set their clothing back to rights as the clock on their wall struck three.

Harry smiled. "I'll just go get us some tea, then?" he asked as he moved to the door.

"White without," Draco told him.

Harry paused, one hand on the doorframe as a fond smile tugged at his mouth. "I know how you take your tea, Draco," he said, his voice gently chiding, and he disappeared into the hall.

Draco sighed, already shaking off the afterglow, and adjusted his clothes before going back behind his desk and charming the framed photo there into a mirror and attempting to get his hair to lie flat again.

He was still at it when Harry returned, bearing two teacups.

"Your hair is fine," he said, setting one of the cups on the edge of Draco's desk.

"You wouldn't understand," Draco said. "No one can tell if your hair is sex-messy or normal-messy." But he left off fixing his own hair and ran his hand briefly through Harry's, relishing the way the locks felt, thick and glossy, as they slid between his fingers.

Harry just laughed and ducked his head out of Draco's reach. "Score one for my awful hair, then."

Smiling, Draco picked up his tea and took a sip. He pulled a face. "You didn't make it hot enough."

"I made it the same as mine," Harry said, rolling his eyes and taking a swallow of his own tea as if to prove a point.

“And you don’t make yours hot enough,” Draco said. He took another sip, and debated casting a heating charm on it. Reheating tea could sometimes make it a little bitter, and Draco wasn’t sure whether he’d prefer that to tepid. “I’ll expect you to do better next time.”

Harry rolled his eyes again. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

He retreated back behind his desk and flipped open the nearest folder, settling in easily and barely looking at Draco. Smiling to himself, Draco turned his attention to his own paperwork.

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Harry had gotten more work done since teatime than he had in the entire rest of the day. He’d finished off the customer records for the last of the Ls and had started in on the Ms while Draco worked through the dwindling stack of Ks. Harry finished scanning the customer records for Quentin Maldonado, ticking off only two of their key ingredients before dropping him off on the completed stack and picking up the next one, and he groaned inwardly at the heft of it. This one would take ages to get through. He flipped it open and glanced at the name.

Draco Malfoy.

Harry froze, staring at the file in his hands before risking a glance across the room. Draco made a little tick mark in the file he had open before him and reached for his teacup. Harry let his eyes drift back to his own folder as he leafed through it, finding several of the ingredients on their list at just a glance, which he supposed was to be expected seeing as how it appeared that Draco had put in an order for their entire bloody catalogue. Slowly, Harry closed the folder and cast a discreet Duplicating Charm on it. Even more slowly, he edged the orange Top Secret file out of his satchel and slid Draco’s customer records inside. There. Let Kingsley sort through that. He’d been hounding Harry for more on Draco, and sixty-three pages of potions ingredients should be enough to satisfy him.

Harry sighed a little at that. Kingsley still thought Draco was guilty. Harry still couldn’t prove him innocent. Ron hadn’t been able to find anything out in his own investigation. And nothing new had happened in three long weeks. The whole thing was at a standstill and Harry didn’t have any leads to pursue or avenues to investigate. At this point, it looked like there was nothing he could do except wait for something to happen, and aside from putting the bare minimum into his reports to Kingsley to keep himself on the case, that was exactly what he’d been doing.

Harry reached for the next folder, which he found wonderfully light. Cassia Malloy had ordered a paltry two page’s worth of ingredients. He set her atop his finished stack and picked up Draco’s folder again.

“Really?” he asked. “Did you really need to order sixty-three pages of crap from Unalloyed? Do you have any idea how long this is going to take me to go through?” He shook the folder

in Draco's direction.

Draco huffed a sigh and leaned back in his chair. "Yes, Potter," he said dryly. "I ordered sixty-three pages of unnecessary potions ingredients just to piss you off. I'm *amazed* you've seen through my clever plan."

Despite Draco's sarcasm, Harry felt something warm swell behind his ribs. He found that he liked the way Draco said his surname these days, so different from back at Hogwarts where he used to spit it out as if it had a bad taste. Now he tended to use it if he found Harry amusing or exasperating or, more likely, both at once, and he said it with a warmth and fondness that Harry couldn't get enough of.

"I wouldn't put it past you. Once a Slytherin…"

"You're ridiculous," Draco said. "And I told you, I dabble in potions." He shrugged. "It's a useful hobby." He paused and peered across the room at Harry over the rims of his glasses in that way that Harry liked entirely too much. "You don't really have to go through my folder, you know. I'm not brewing Verve."

He was about to reply when Ron barged in.

"Hey, Harry."

"Knocking, Weasley, it's not a foreign concept," Draco snapped.

"Shut it, Malfoy," Ron replied without even looking at him.

Harry grinned and leaned around his friend to where Draco was glaring at the back of Ron's head. "Don't blame him, Draco, he was raised in a barn."

"Barns have doors," Draco muttered but he went back to his paperwork.

Ron snickered at that before he grinned at Harry. "Hermione's working late tonight, I thought you might want to grab dinner with me?"

Harry glanced up at the clock, surprised to see that five o'clock had come and gone. He hesitated. It'd been a while since he'd spent any time alone with Ron, but he'd really been looking forward to taking Draco home and having his way with him again.

"Sorry, Ron. I sort of have plans."

"Not very good ones," Draco said, tossing down his quill to address Ron. "I'd planned to work late tonight to make a dent in these customer records, and Harry very generously agreed to stay and help me. But I'll be fine on my own." He waved a hand. "Feel free to take him."

"Great, thanks Malfoy," Ron said.

"But…" Harry began.

“Go on,” Draco told him. “I’ll be fine.” He raised his eyebrows significantly. “I’ll just be here.”

The meaning was clear: Come back when you’re done, I’ll be waiting.

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On Friday when Harry offered to fetch him a cup of tea at three o’clock, Draco stood and stretched and suggested they both go. He really could use a chance to stretch his legs, and Harry never made his tea hot enough anyhow.

They walked down to the break room together, chatting idly about the Harpies’ upcoming match against the Appleby Arrows, and Draco only paid their conversation half a mind, also speculating that he had a chance to finish off the rest of the Ns before they went off to the pub tonight, and between all of that along with the fact that Harry hadn’t bothered to put his Auror robes back on before they left their office – those jeans did *very* nice things for his backside – Draco was a little distracted. He bumped into someone as he rounded the corner into the break room and jumped back.

“Pardon me,” he said before he fully registered whom he’d walked into.

Smith sneered at him. “Watch where you’re going.”

“Let it go,” Weasley said from behind Smith.

Draco wasn’t sure which one of them Weasley meant, but he nodded once and edged around the pair, heading for the kettle with Harry trailing after him.

“Fucking Death Eater,” Smith snarled. “It’s a fucking disgrace that he’s even allowed to be here.”

Draco froze, and Harry clamped one of his hands around Draco’s elbow, his fingers squeezing tight through the heavy material of his Auror robe in a silent warning.

“So you’re having a shit day, that’s no reason to take it out on Malfoy,” Weasley said. “He’s an Auror, same as us. He’s earned his place here.”

“His place here,” Smith repeated mockingly. “And he’s so smug about it, aren’t you, Malfoy? Smug about forcing your way in here, a snake in the henhouse. Aren’t you?”

Draco jerked his arm free of Harry’s grasp as his anger flared. He tamped down on it as he turned slowly to face Smith. He’s not worth it, he told himself. This isn’t worth it. Around them, the handful of other Aurors in the break room had gone silent.

“It’s a shame everyone’s too spineless to get rid of you,” Smith continued, his lip curling contemptuously.

Draco raised his eyebrows. “And you’re not?”

A cruel smile curled around Smith’s mouth. “I’m not. Give me half a reason, Malfoy, and I’ll be glad to do away with you. Stamp you out like a weed in a rosebush.”

Draco’s tenuous control snapped. “Very well, then,” he said, stalking forward. “I accept.”

Smith faltered. “You what?”

“I accept your challenge,” Draco said, his fingers deftly undoing the buttons of his robes. “You did intend to challenge me, did you not?”

Smith swallowed. “Challenge?” He suddenly looked a whole hell of a lot less cocksure and Draco felt a hot surge of glee. “I didn’t challenge you.”

“Oh, but you did.” He finished with the buttons and shrugged out of the heavy garment. He tossed it to Harry without looking, and didn’t hear it hit the ground. “According to Chapter Two, Section Four, Paragraph Twelve of the Dueling Codes, any threat to a Wizard’s good health or well-being may be interpreted as a Challenge and may be immediately answered as such. You offered to, what was it? Do away with me? Stamp me out? That sounds rather like a threat to my well-being to me.” Draco spread one hand to his audience, and took a risk. “What say you?”

An older Auror with a long salt-and-pepper beard nodded slowly. Thompson, Draco thought his name was. “Sounded like it to me.”

Draco nodded to him, pleased to have found an ally, and returned his attention to Smith. “You see there? Challenge,” he said with vicious satisfaction. “And I accept.”

“You’re mental,” Smith told him. “You know I didn’t mean it like that, and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

“Actually, there is,” Draco snapped. “Chapter Two, Section Four, Paragraph Fourteen. If the Wizard who put for the Challenge withdraws it after the accused party accepts, this shall be construed as forfeit, and the wronged party shall thereafter be entitled to—“

“You’re quoting Dueling Codes at me like it means something. It’s not law.”

Draco let a nasty smile play over his features. “Oh, but it is. You see, in the case of Petalsby vs. Coffington put before the Wizengamot in 1726, it was unanimously decided that the Dueling Codes be integrated into Wizarding Law. It’s all quite legal, I assure you.” Lucius had made Draco memorize the Dueling Codes long before he’d ever laid eyes on Hogwarts. Something about being able to defend the Malfoy honor or some rubbish like that. Draco didn’t think the Malfoys had all that much honor left these days, but he could still quote those rules, chapter and verse. He’d never been glad of it until now.

“And archaic,” Smith shot back. “No one’s bothered with those laws in the better part of a century.”

“But they’re still law,” Thompson called out and the woman beside him nodded in agreement, and Draco was delighted to realize that there was apparently an Auror that people hated more than they hated him. “He’s right, Smith. You’ve challenged him, and he’s accepted. If you forfeit, he’s entitled to a public apology and monetary recompense. Hell, he could even attack you anyhow with impunity, depending how disparaged he feels.”

“I am aggrieved,” Draco said, still smiling. “My feelings are *very* hurt.”

Smith’s mouth worked open and shut a few times. “But he needs a second,” he said a bit desperately. “He has to find someone willing to—“

“I’ll do it,” Harry said, his voice calm and even, and Draco didn’t think he’d ever adored him more than he did right now.

“I suppose that makes me yours,” Weasley sighed from beside Smith. “You’ve really done it now. If I were you, I’d just take the first hit and have done with it.”

Smith stared at him incredulously. “Give up?”

Weasley stared back at him. “Have you *seen* him in a wand fight?” he asked. “Because I have. I went through training with him, and I’m telling you this isn’t a fight you want to have.”

“As the accused, it’s my responsibility to set the time and place for our duel. I’d like to do it now, if you don’t mind,” Draco said.

“Now?” Smith repeated, his eyes darting. “Here?”

Draco shrugged. “Why not? There’s plenty of space, we’ve got our seconds and witnesses present.” He glanced at the clock. “And I’ve got ten minutes of my break left.” He smiled again, relishing the way Smith flinched back from it. “That should be plenty of time, I imagine.”

Without waiting for a response, he flicked his wand and the tables and chairs shifted, opening a wide aisle down the center of the room. Draco stalked to the other end of it, deftly rolling up his right sleeve as he went. It didn’t escape Smith’s notice that he left his other sleeve down.

“Got something to hide there, Malfoy?” he taunted as he took his place opposite Draco.

“What, never seen a Mark before, Smith?” Draco taunted back, and predictably Smith flushed. It was common knowledge that he hadn’t fought in the war, opting instead to fuck off to the Continent until all the fighting was over.

Harry and Weasley took their places on either side of the aisle, Harry on his right and Weasley on his left. They nodded to each other, then shifted so that Weasley stood closer to Draco and Harry stood closer to Smith. In addition to standing in for a dueler should he find himself unable to fight, the second’s job was also to watch their dueler’s opponent for any signs of cheating during the duel itself.

“You will bow,” Weasley said.

Smith barely inclined his head, but Draco dropped into a full bow, left arm tucked snugly against the small of his back, right arm held out to his side. When he straightened, Harry was smirking at him.

“Take your positions, gentlemen,” he said, and Weasley joined him as he counted down, “Three, two, one!”

“Expelliarmus!” Smith snapped out.

Draco blocked it easily. “Serpensortia!”

A jet of white light burst from his wand and condensed into a massive black snake that dove for Smith.

“Vipera Evanesca!” Smith countered with a sneer. “Figures you’d cast a snake.”

“I’ve been casting that since I was twelve,” Draco said, falling back into the formal accepted combative position. “What can I say, I’m a creature of habit.” He flicked a quick glance at Harry and winked. Harry’s gaze heated.

Smith sneered at him fired off an Impediment Jinx, and it was on. The rest of the room fell away as Draco cast and countered, blocked and dodged. He restrained himself from casting anything truly nasty because Smith wasn’t even a challenging opponent, to Draco’s mild disappointment. Harry had been more of a challenge at the age of twelve, and Draco really had no idea how Smith had passed training with his predictably textbook technique. Draco could have ended the match at any time, but he rather enjoyed the way Smith’s casting grew more and more frantic, but when he aimed a Blasting Curse at Draco’s head, Draco decided that this had gone on long enough and it was time to make his point.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” he cast, aiming the spell at Smith’s shoes, but didn’t put any intent behind it, then followed it up with a Jelly-Legs Jinx. And while Smith countered that, Draco pulled up on the Wingardium.

Smith’s heels flew out from underneath him and he landed hard on his back, where Draco hit him with a Body-Bind. The room broke into spontaneous applause, but Draco wasn’t finished yet. He stalked up the aisle, past Weasley, past Harry, and crouched down beside Smith.

“You really are quite stupid, aren’t you?” he murmured softly. “You think I’m so dangerous, yet you go out of your way to provoke me. You’re right about it, though; I am dangerous. I was a Death Eater, after all. I learned quite a few things from my time as one. And lucky for you, since then I have also learned restraint.” He leaned closer to Smith, and said, “But I still have my limits. Don’t ever cross me again.”

He stood and tossed a careless Finite over his shoulder. Weasley shook his hand, and Harry looked at him with burning eyes as he handed Draco his robes back. Draco nodded to him and glanced at the clock. Five minutes. That was just long enough for a cuppa.

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Back in their office, Harry shut the door and rounded on Draco.

“Fucking arse,” Draco was muttering. He shucked off his robes and hung them neatly on the coat hook by the door. He still hadn’t rolled down his right sleeve. “Really, he shouldn’t have —mmphh!”

Harry cut him off by attacking his mouth in a sudden crushing kiss. He walked Draco backward until the backs of Draco’s knees struck the sofa, and Harry pushed so they both toppled over onto it in a tangle of limbs.

“You can’t,” Draco panted between kisses. “Not here. We’re on the clock.”

“I know,” Harry said, working open the buttons of Draco’s shirt. He had to see that tattoo. “Don’t care.”

Draco batted his hands away. “Really, we can’t.”

“Really, I don’t care.” Harry looked into Draco’s eyes. “Do you have any idea how fucking hot you were in there?”

“I was dueling, not putting on a strip tease,” Draco said, annoyed.

“Hmm, well you’ll have to do the other one for me so I can get a good comparison, but the duel was more than enough for me.” He got the last few buttons undone. “You looked angry and dangerous, and all I could think of was ‘I’ve fucked that.’ That I had, just this morning and how you smiled at me, and I thought of your tattoo and all the things that you only let me see, and I want you, god, I want you so much right now.” He was rambling and didn’t care, and then he was kissing Draco again, and Draco was letting him, arching up into him, his body responding as Harry slid his hands over Draco’s belly and up his chest and back down his ribs. The dragon tattoo lashed its tail and shook its wings. Harry moaned.

“We really shouldn’t,” Draco panted against his mouth, but it was only a token protest, soft and breathy and he captured Harry’s mouth in another kiss before Harry could even reply.

Harry lowered himself between Draco’s legs and let one of his hands drift down to Draco’s groin. He found him more than half hard already and pressed a palm to the growing bulge. Draco whimpered into Harry’s mouth and twitched his hips up. Harry grabbed Draco by the wrist and pressed his hand against his own cock.

“Feel this?” he said, grinding down against Draco’s palm. “This is what you’ve done to me. I had to stand there as your second and pretend that *this* wasn’t happening. You see what you do to me?”

“Lube,” Draco panted. “In my bag.”

Harry leaned back and raised his eyebrow at him. Draco scowled, and Harry thought he shouldn't find the way Draco's nose scrunched up nearly as adorable as he did.

"Well, if it's going to happen, I might as well do my bit to make it happen quickly. We are on the clock, you know."

Harry laughed and scrambled off him. He dug around in Draco's bag until he found the little vial, and when he turned around he found that Draco was lying on his back with his trousers and pants off. Harry froze, taking in Draco's wanton pose, all long limbs and pale skin with his hard cock jutting up against his belly, shirt hanging open, face flushed and eyes dark as he regarded Harry, and that tattoo, that fucking tattoo, stark against his side. Draco was so real and so beautiful and so flawed, and in that moment he was so perfect that Harry couldn't breathe.

"What?" Draco whispered. "You're looking at me like…" He trailed off and swallowed hard.

"Like what?" Harry whispered back, but Draco only shook his head and held out a hand. Harry went to him and settled back between his thighs. He managed to get the cap off the vial and slicked his fingers. "This is going to be fast," he warned, sliding his hand down between them.

"I know," Draco said with a smirk, echoing Harry's earlier words as two fingers breached him. He made a small, pleased sound and arched against Harry's hand. "Don't care."

Harry captured his mouth in a bruising kiss as he worked his fingers in and out, stretching Draco quickly. Draco turned his head away, breaking the kiss.

"Enough, enough," he panted. "I'm ready."

Harry didn't need to be told twice. He pulled back just far enough to line himself up, then sank back down, entering Draco with a sigh. It was so hot and so tight and Harry had been worked up for too long to take it slow. Watching Draco duel was undoubtedly the best foreplay he'd ever experienced. "Really fast," he amended.

"Still don't care," Draco said, breathless. "Get on with it then." He rocked his hips up.

And then Harry couldn't have stopped himself if he'd tried. He snapped his hips forward in short, sharp strokes that had Draco whining and writhing beneath him, his arms clutching tight around Harry's ribs, his heels digging into Harry's buttocks.

"Close," Harry panted. "I'm close. You should…"

He didn't have to finish the sentence. Draco let go with his right arm and pushed his hand between them, finding his cock and stroking it roughly in time with Harry's thrusts. Harry wanted to wait, wanted to make Draco to come first, wanted to feel the muscles of his arse clenching tight around his prick, but it was too late. His thrusts went erratic as he reached his climax, and the door opened.

Harry couldn't stop himself. He squeezed his eyes shut and let out a strangled moan as his orgasm slammed through him, and when he opened his eyes, Ron was still standing there. Draco had gone very still and very quiet beneath him, his arms and legs tightening around Harry, holding him close to hide his own nakedness. Ron's face had gone as red as his hair. For long moments, no one moved.

Then Draco cleared his throat and spoke up. "There's this thing," he said primly. "I hear it's called knocking."

"Oh fuck *off*, Malfoy," Ron shot back, then turned even redder as he realized what he'd just said. He turned and fled, the door slamming shut behind him.

Harry sighed and removed himself from Draco as he reached for his wand. He cast cleaning charms over them both, then hesitated. "Do you want me to finish you off?"

Draco gave him an exasperated look. "Merlin, no," he said, reaching for his trousers. "Seeing the look of abject horror on Weasley's face killed it for me, thanks."

"I guess we should have locked the door," Harry said with a wince.

Draco threw him a dour look. "I guess so."

Harry finished doing up his jeans and leaned over to give Draco a kiss, relieved when Draco let him. "I'm going to go talk to Ron."

Draco nodded as he buckled his belt. "I think that would be best."

He left Draco dressing behind him and hurried down the hall to Ron's office. Inside he found Ron sitting behind his desk and Smith nattering on about the duel.

"Get out, Smith," he said.

Smith's mouth dropped open, then he glared. "This is my office, Potter, you can't just come in here and—"

"Get out, Smith," Ron snapped.

Smith took one look at the expression on Ron's face and left. Ron aimed a locking spell at the door before he slid his wand back up his sleeve and folded his hands together on his desk. He took several deep breaths and looked like he was trying to rein himself in.

"Um, look, Ron…" Harry began.

"You great bloody idiot," Ron said. "I can't *believe* that you'd do something this stupid."

"Hey!" Harry protested, but Ron talked over him.

"You've fucked him, Harry. You've completely fucked him. And not," he added, stabbing a finger in Harry's direction, "in the way that I just walked in on."

“It’s not…” he began.

“You’re the lead on his bloody investigation!” Ron exploded. “He’s under suspicion of murder, Harry, four counts of it, and you’ve *completely* fucked him over.”

“I know I should have waited until all that’s been straightened out, but it’s fine,” Harry said. “I know he’s innocent—“

“Bloody hell,” Ron said, stunned. “You really, honestly don’t see it.”

“See what?” Harry demanded.

Ron sighed and visibly composed himself. “You’re not going to be able to keep this a secret forever. Yes, you think he’s innocent, but what’s your word, your testimony, your entire bloody investigation so far going to be worth when it gets out that you’ve been fucking him the whole time?”

“Not the whole time,” Harry said faintly as the implications of Ron’s words sunk in. “Just the last few weeks.”

“Doesn’t matter. The fact is, you’re too close to him, and if it gets out, they’ll scrap everything you’ve done so far. They’ll take you off his case and assign someone else. Now, how many people do you think will give him a fair chance? Hell, if he gets someone like Smith I could see them setting up the investigation to frame him. And you won’t be able to do a damn thing to stop it.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Oh god.”

“Yes. Oh god is right. And even if you do manage to keep your relationship a secret from everyone else, how they hell do you think you’re going to keep your investigation a secret from Malfoy? You didn’t think you’d find some evidence proving that Malfoy’s innocent and everyone would just say ‘Oh thanks, Harry, good to know!’ and that’d be the end of it, did you? That just because you’re the Boy Who Lived they’d just let it go on your say-so, did you?”

In truth, Harry had sort of assumed that’s exactly what would happen. If he could find some irrefutable proof that Draco had nothing to do with those deaths, Harry had assumed the whole thing would just…

“No,” Ron went on. “Even with evidence, there’s a better than even chance this’ll turn into a formal Inquiry, maybe even go before the Wizengamot. Even if the case gets shelved, Malfoy is always poking around down in Filing. He’s going to find out. There’s no way he won’t find out.”

Harry’s chest grew tight. Draco would be livid, absolutely furious, and Harry didn’t think their relationship would survive the fallout. “Oh fuck.”

“Yes,” Ron said. “Exactly.”

Harry sucked in a deep breath that didn't seem to contain nearly enough oxygen. His head spun. "Oh fuck," he said again. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to *fix this*," Ron said, leaning over his desk. "You're going to leave my office right now and march right over to Shacklebolt and tell him that you are no longer able to remain objective about Malfoy. You're going to tell him that you can no longer be primary on this investigation, and you can't be Malfoy's partner. You're going to tell him that you've brought me in as a consult and recommend that I continue in your stead." He leaned closer. "I'll be fair to him, Harry, I swear I will."

Harry nodded jerkily. "And what about Draco?"

"After you're done with Shacklebolt, you're going straight back to your office and you're going to tell Malfoy everything."

"He'll break up with me," Harry said. His ribs felt too tight for his lungs. "He'll end it, god, he'll be so angry. And I can't…"

Ron was watching him, and he winced. "Shit," he said. "You love him, don't you?"

"I…" Harry hadn't thought about it like that, but Ron's words struck something in him that resonated like a tuning fork. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I do."

"Well, fuck," Ron said. "This would be a lot easier if it was just sex. But I guess it sort of explains why you're being such a giant fucking idiot." He sighed, and when he continued his voice was gentler. "You still need to tell him. This is something he needs to find out from you."

"I know," Harry said. "I know, and I will. Just… not yet. His birthday is next weekend, and I've made plans and I don't want to ruin that for him. One week, Ron. One week won't make a difference. And then I'll tell him." He felt nauseated just to think about it and he swallowed it down. "I'll tell him everything."

Ron sighed again. "Fine," he said. "But that's it. Don't let this drag out with one excuse after another. He needs to know."

"I won't," Harry said. He needed to leave. Despite everything, the only thing he wanted right now was the solid comfort of Draco's company. "I… I really owe you for this. So, thanks."

Ron waved a hand and a wry smile tugged at his mouth. "If you were any kind of friend, you'd offer to Obliviate me."

Harry forced himself to smile back, then he opened the door and went back to Draco.

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Draco wanted to skip pub night and spend the evening in, but Harry insisted they go. He'd been off balance for the rest of the afternoon, after he'd returned from Weasley's office. He'd walked straight up to Draco and caught him up in a hug so close that he made it a little hard to breathe, like he was afraid that Draco might vanish in a puff of smoke if he loosened his hold for even an instant.

"It's all right," he'd said. "I'm right here, I'm not going anywhere."

And Harry had given a peculiar sort of laugh and said, "I know."

Draco was dying to know what Weasley had said to him, but when he'd asked Harry had only shrugged it off and insisted they try to wrap up their paperwork for the week. Frowning, Draco had gone to it but really couldn't focus. He didn't come anywhere near finishing up the Ns.

Now at the pub, Harry and Weasley were keeping their distance from each other, aside from sending each other strangely laden looks. Weasley stayed ensconced at his table in the corner with Granger, who frowned a lot and kept casting suspicious glances at where Harry lingered near the bar, going through vodka tonics at a mildly alarming rate. When Granger left her table for the toilets, Draco left Harry to where he was chatting a bit too loud and a little too brightly about the Carsons case and crossed the room to Weasley.

"Hello," he said, sliding into Granger's recently vacated seat.

"Malfoy," Weasley said with a nod. "I've been wondering when you were going to show up."

Draco didn't see any point in beating around the bush, and he didn't know how much time he had before Granger returned so he just jumped straight in. "Harry won't tell me what you talked about," he said.

"Oh?"

"And he's been acting strangely all afternoon. That leads me to the conclusion that it wasn't a good conversation." He paused and sucked in a deep breath. "You don't approve of us. You don't approve of me."

To his surprise, Weasley barked out a laugh. "Of course it wasn't a good conversation. Look, Harry's my best mate, and I really don't want to think about him doing… you know. To anyone, not just you."

Draco frowned. "Understandable."

Weasley sighed. "Look. I'm just going to say this, and then we can pretend that it all never happened. Harry told me weeks ago that he fancied you. And I wasn't sold on the idea of you two being… whatever you are to each other, not at first. But he's been happier than I've seen him in a long time, and you seem happier than I've seen you ever. I'm sort of kicking myself that I didn't add it up sooner." He paused and seemed to be sorting through his next words carefully. "Obviously you're good together, and good for each other. That's not my issue. I'm just concerned that someone's going to end up hurt."

“I know we haven’t had the best past, but we’ve worked through it,” Draco said. “I’m not going to hurt him.”

The look on Weasley’s face sent a shiver of apprehension squirming through Draco’s stomach. “I know. Merlin help me, I know. It’s just that… things between you two have never been easy, have they?”

“They haven’t,” Draco allowed. “But we’ve both changed a lot. We’ve grown up. This is going to be different.”

Weasley nodded slowly. “I really hope you’re right.”

Granger came back just then, and Draco spent a few minutes chatting politely with her before he took his leave and made his way back over to Harry, who was beginning to look decidedly wobbly. Harry grinned at him and slung an arm over his shoulder.

“Wanna get out of here?” he rumbled in Draco’s ear.

Draco, who hadn’t wanted to come here tonight in the first place, nodded quickly. “Yes.”

Harry gulped down the rest of his drink and half-dragged Draco outside where he flung his arms around him. “I’m too drunk to Apparate. Take me home?”

Draco’s brow furrowed. “It’s a nice night, wouldn’t you rather walk?”

Harry shook his head and nipped at Draco’s neck. “No.”

Sighing, Draco Apparated them back to Harry’s bedroom, since that’s where they’d more than likely end up. The world had barely come into focus around them before Harry was on him, his tongue pressing eagerly against the seam of Draco’s lips, and Draco opened his mouth and let Harry snog him. They’d barely begun, but when Harry pushed his hips against Draco, he felt the hard length of Harry’s erection.

He chuckled. “Eager, are we?” he mumbled against Harry’s lips.

Harry broke away from Draco’s mouth and kissed along his jaw. “I want you.”

“I’m yours,” Draco sighed as Harry mouthed at that particularly sensitive spot just behind his ear.

“No, not like that.” Harry sighed and pulled back. “Fuck, I’d planned to try and make this romantic or meaningful or some rot like that, but right now I just want you too fucking bad.” He stepped close again, Draco could feel Harry’s hot breath on his ear. “I want your cock in me. I’ve been thinking about it all night, having you inside me.”

Before he could reply, Harry fumbled at Draco’s trousers and Draco batted his hands away to do it himself. “I want you,” he said.

Harry shoved Draco back onto the bed and yanked off his shirt before crawling up between his legs. He jerked Draco’s underpants out of the way and sucked Draco’s half-hard cock into

his mouth. Draco groaned.

“Thought you wanted me to…” he began, trailing off at the wicked look Harry gave him.

Harry pulled off his cock with a wet pop. “Oh, I do. But I want you to fuck me for a long time, you see. This is just to take the edge off.”

Draco couldn’t see cause to argue with that and let him get on with it. Harry was far more intense than he normally was, sucking at Draco with an abandon that made his toes curl. Draco came hard and fast.

Before he had a chance to recover, Harry had moved away to fetch the tube of lubricant from his bedside table. He twisted the cap off and poured it over his fingers, then reached behind himself and pushed in two at once with a long, low groan. He worked the fingers in and out for a few moments, then poured more lube over his hand and reached for Draco.

“I don’t think I can, just yet,” he protested as Harry’s warm slick hand closed around his cock.

“I don’t care,” Harry said. “You’re going to.” His hand squeezed.

Draco’s eyes rolled back and his flagging erection filled a little more. “Oh Merlin. I think you’re right.”

He let Harry fondle him until he was fully hard again, then gave Harry a shove and watched him topple over onto his back. He reached for Harry’s arse and Harry squirmed away.

“I don’t want your fingers, I want your prick,” he said.

“But you barely prepared yourself. Shouldn’t I—“

“I’m fine, just fucking do it,” Harry told him.

Carefully, Draco arranged himself over Harry and lined up his cock, and slowly pushed forward. For a second he didn’t think it was going to work, that little hole seemed far too small to accommodate him, but then Harry jerked his hips up and the head of his cock popped past that tight ring of muscle.

“Yes,” Harry groaned.

Draco pushed further, deeper into that tight, slick heat, and he was suddenly very glad that Harry had sucked him off because if he hadn’t, he thought this might have ended right here. This felt almost too intense to handle, the hot pressure of Harry’s arse around his cock, Harry’s hands clutching at his back, Harry’s hot breath panting at his neck, and in that moment Draco had no idea why they’d put off doing it like this for as long as they had. Harry sucked at Draco’s neck hard enough to leave a mark, and Draco rocked his hips forward, setting up a leisurely rhythm.

Harry babbled the whole time Draco fucked him. “Oh, fuck, oh yes. Just like that, just there. Oh god, it’s been so long. Draco, Draco, oh fuck, harder, harder please.” His hands scrabbled

at Draco's hips. "Come on, come on, do it harder, please, fuck *please*."

Draco thrust a little harder, but Harry still felt so tight around him, and he was afraid of hurting him.

In an instant, Harry's hands went from trying to pull him closer to shoving him away. "Get off me, get off."

For a split second, Draco thought he'd done something wrong as he scrambled away from Harry, then Harry shoved him down on his back and swung a leg over his thighs, and before he could react, Harry impaled himself on Draco in one smooth motion. He slammed himself down, again and again, his head thrown back, cheeks pink, a dark flush spreading down his neck and across his collarbones.

"Yes," he groaned, long and low.

And Draco had never seen anything more erotic than this, Harry Potter fucking himself on Draco's cock.

Draco couldn't do anything but fight to keep his eyes open when they threatened to slide shut, his hands grasping Harry's thighs just above his knees, feeling the muscles there just beneath the skin clench and unclench as he rode Draco. One of his hands went to his cock and fisted it roughly as Draco watched. The dark flush spread down his chest and he moaned. Draco gave up and let his eyes squeeze shut, and lost himself in the feel of Harry around and above him. All too soon, Harry's whole body shuddered and went rigid, and Draco's eyes flew open just in time to see his cock throb, spurting over Draco's belly as Harry's arse clenched and spasmed around his cock.

"Oh fuck, oh…" And Draco thrust once, twice, and came too.

Harry collapsed forward, his face pressed against Draco's neck, and Draco wound his arms around him, holding him close.

"Clean me up?" Harry asked, his voice muffled.

Draco Summoned his wand from the tangle of their clothes and cast. Harry snuggled closer.

"Was it good?" Harry asked through a yawn.

"It was brilliant," Draco told him.

Harry made a small contented hum against Draco's neck. "Better than the other way, I mean? Now you've done both so you can say."

Draco went quiet for a moment, thinking it over. This had felt amazing, but there was something about bottoming that felt more intimate to him. Having Harry inside him made them feel closer, more connected. Draco couldn't imagine ever letting another person inside him the way he let Harry. But that was ridiculous and sappy and more romantic than Draco felt comfortable admitting, so he didn't say any of it aloud.

“I think I prefer bottoming,” he said. “But this was nice too.”

Harry made a little hum of approval. “Good.” A few seconds of silence ticked past. “There’s hangover potion in the bathroom, will you Accio it for me? I’m going to need it in the morning.”

Draco pressed a kiss to the crown of Harry’s head, wild black strands tickling his nose. “Of course.”

He Summoned the little vial from the bathroom and set it within easy reach on the bedside, then pulled the blanket over them and turned out the lights.

“Goodnight, Harry,” he said.

Harry’s only response was a soft snore.

Chapter 13

Harry woke slowly, snug layers of sleep flaking away as vague impressions of warmth and darkness dissipated into roiling nausea. When he finally worked up the nerve to open his eyes, the bright early-morning sunlight felt like ground glass against his corneas. Harry let his eyes fall shut again and groaned.

The mattress dipped as someone shifted beside him. “Here,” Draco said and pressed something cool and smooth against Harry’s palm.

Harry cracked open one eye and squinted through the pain at the small vial he held. “Oh thank god.”

He shoved himself to a sitting position and yanked the stopper out, then took one deep breath to brace himself before he tipped the vial into his mouth. The fetid potion coated his tongue in a thick sludge and his throat worked three times before he could actually force himself to choke it down. His stomach heaved, and Harry squeezed his eyes shut and mentally ran through all the Quidditch fouls he knew in alphabetical order. He made it to Cobbing before the potion kicked in properly and his nausea settled.

Harry flopped back onto the pillows with a sigh. “I’ve never figured out why they make that one taste so bloody awful,” he griped.

Draco propped himself up on one elbow. “It’s all to do with how the aconite interacts with the shrivelfig pulp. The pulp is acidic and once it begins to break down the—“

“Ugh,” Harry said and clapped a hand over his eyes. “It’s too early for Potions lectures.”

“Well you asked,” Draco said, then added, “I’m developing a better tasting version.”

“Really?” Harry asked and lifted his hand from his face. “Have you got it working?”

Draco shrugged a shoulder. “Sort of. It doesn’t taste like sweaty socks anymore, but you’ll burp broccoli for the rest of the day. Not much of an improvement in my opinion.” He shrugged again. “I’m still working on it.”

“When you get it working, you’ll make millions,” Harry told him. “Absolute millions.”

“I’ve already got millions,” Draco said with a smile. “What would I do with more?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said distantly, distracted by the way the early morning sunlight slanted across Draco’s skin. In the bright golden warmth of it, even his scars looked beautiful. “Buy a small country?”

Draco snorted. “What on earth would I do with one of those?”

“Hmm. Rule over it with an iron fist?”

“Sounds like a lot of work to me,” Draco sighed.

Harry grinned. “Yes, but you’d have loads of people to worship you and kneel before you. Though I’m more than willing to get on my knees for you right now. You like me on my knees, as I recall.” He shifted closer to kiss the long slope of Draco’s neck and winced as his arse twinged with the motion.

“Are you all right?” Draco asked, leaning back out of Harry’s reach. His brows drew together in concern.

“Fine, fine,” Harry said and leaned in for a kiss.

Draco dodged his efforts. “Right. Only… You were rather, ah, enthusiastic last night. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Harry shook his head. “No, not at all.” He smiled a little sheepishly and rubbed a hand through his hair. “I, er, told you I like to bottom when I’m drinking.”

“Yes, you said you *like* to bottom,” Draco said. “I like Quidditch. I like trifling with potions. I like my afternoon cup of tea.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Oh please, you’re an absolute bear if you don’t get your afternoon cup of tea.”

“Fine, that’s a poor example,” Draco allowed. “However, it doesn’t change the fact that you were something of an animal yourself last night.”

Harry shrugged with all the casualness he could muster. “All right then, I like it rather a lot. And a bit rough.” He glanced at Draco. “Does that…bother you?”

For a moment, Draco frowned. “No, it just surprised me. I’ve always thought of bottoming as the more passive role, and last night you showed me how wrong that assumption was.” He nudged Harry with an elbow. “So, speaking of tea…”

Harry pulled a face as he slid out of bed. “That’s another thing you’d get with your country: loads of people to fetch your tea for you.”

Draco rolled over onto his stomach and propped his chin on one hand. “What would I need them for? I’ve got you, haven’t I?”

Harry felt his heart turn over and he couldn’t keep a soppy smile from spreading over his face. “You absolutely do, for as long as you’ll have me.”

Abruptly, the pleasant ache in his chest turned painful, and Harry turned away and hurried into the kitchen where he filled the kettle and set it on the stove. He leaned back against the counter and folded his arms over his chest as he waited for it to heat. He’d meant what he’d said, that he belonged to Draco for as long as Draco would have him. But he was afraid that Draco wouldn’t want him for much longer, not after Harry told him about the investigation. Draco’s birthday was next Monday, and then on Tuesday Harry would confess everything. It hurt to think that he might only have a little over a week left with Draco. He sighed and

scratched at his bare thigh, sort of wishing he'd thought to put on underpants before he'd gone dashing out of his bedroom.

Well, if he only had one week left, he was sure as hell going to make that week count. And maybe after Draco got done screaming at him and his anger cooled a bit, Harry could make him see that their relationship was genuine. He'd do everything he could in the next few days to show Draco how much he cared, and then trust that Draco would remember this after it all exploded.

The shrieking of the tea kettle jerked Harry out of his thoughts. He took it off the flame and set up a cup with tea leaves to steep. He determinedly put any thoughts of next week from his mind. If he did only have one week left with Draco, he didn't want to waste a single moment of it worrying.

Harry added a splash of milk to the cup before he picked it up and started back to the bedroom. He walked out of the kitchen and found that Draco had moved to the living room to sprawl on the sofa, unconcernedly naked with his cock half-hard. He blushed a little when he saw where Harry's gaze had gone, but made no move to cover himself, and Harry found that he suddenly didn't mind his own nakedness quite so much. They'd probably end up shagging before the morning was out, and it seemed a bit silly to dress only to undress again so soon.

He handed the cup to Draco who took it with a grateful smile. "None for you?"

Harry shook his head. "Stomach's still a little tetchy."

Draco raised the cup to his lips and took a sip, then pulled a face. "You didn't make it hot enough, Potter. You never make it hot enough."

Harry had a sudden flash of himself bringing tea to Draco decades from now, the pair of them wrinkled and grey and stooped, and Draco still bitching that Harry hadn't made it hot enough.

"I love you," Harry said without meaning to.

Draco promptly spilled his tea, and Harry was glad that he hadn't made it hot enough because most of it went splashing across Draco's lap.

"You what?" Draco stared up at him like Harry had just admitted to harboring a secret crush on Umbridge.

The cup in his hand tilted alarmingly, and Harry took it from his numb fingers and set it on the coffee table before Draco spilled what little tea remained in the bottom. He sat next to Draco on the tea-dampened cushion and very carefully took his hand.

"I love you," he said softly.

Draco continued to stare at him as if he'd gone mad. "But how can you? It hasn't been that long."

Harry laughed. "It's been thirteen years, Draco."

“Yes, and we hated each other for half of it and did our level best to ignore each other for the other half. We’ve only been *here* for a couple of months.” His fingers tightened around Harry’s.

Harry smiled at him. “I guess that’s all I needed.”

Draco watched him warily for a few seconds. “I’ve never been in love,” he admitted.

Harry let the smile slip from his face and went quiet for a moment before he said, “It’s pretty nice, from what I’ve seen so far.”

He could practically see Draco picking apart his words, turning them over in his head and decoding them like tea leaves. “Do you mean to tell me,” he said slowly, “that I’m the first?”

Harry nodded solemnly. “My first and only.”

The words had barely left him before Draco lunged, mashing their mouths together awkwardly. It took them a few seconds to adjust into a proper snog, and then Draco’s hands were everywhere, pressing Harry back onto the sofa, sliding up Harry’s chest and back down to grasp his hips. Harry did what he could to assist, but Draco didn’t seem interested in his help. He barely tolerated preparation, chasing Harry’s hand away from his arse after only two fingers, and when Harry entered him he was so tight that Harry had to resort to alphabetically listing Quidditch fouls for the second time that morning. Draco rode him in short, quick little thrusts that Harry felt down to his toes, and both of them only lasted a few minutes.

After, Harry lay on his back, the damp patch of tea beneath him and Draco’s spunk cooling on his belly, and Draco himself pressed warm and a little sticky against his side. He had one leg thrown over Harry’s thighs and one arm draped loosely over Harry’s chest.

“No one’s ever told me they love me before,” Draco said eventually without lifting his head.

Harry lightly stroked his fingers along Draco’s arm. “Really? Not even your mother?”

Draco shook his head against Harry’s shoulder. “No. It’s not really something that purebloods do. I mean, I know she does. She’s my mother, of course she does. She’s just never said it to me.”

“Oh.” Harry thought that was pretty sad but didn’t say so aloud.

Another length of silence slipped past before Draco asked, “You’ve really never been in love before?”

Harry tightened his arms around Draco. “Never.”

Draco hummed. “I would have thought you’d have felt like this toward David. You were together for nearly four years.” He didn’t sound jealous, to Harry’s relief, just genuinely curious.

“I really can’t imagine feeling like this about anyone else,” Harry said. “Not to say I didn’t care about him. I did, very much so. But it wasn’t anything like this.” He pressed a kiss to the

top of Draco's head. "You'll understand soon."

"That's presumptuous of you, Potter," he said, warm and teasing, and finally lifted his head.

Harry smiled, and loved how the use of his surname contrasted with the genuine affection shining in Draco's eyes. "I prefer to think of it as optimistic," he said. His stomach twisted, and Harry pushed the anxiety away.

Draco made another small humming sound. "I'm halfway there already, I think." He put his head back on Harry's shoulder. "I just need a bit more time."

Harry pressed another kiss to the soft blond strands of Draco's hair. "Take as long as you need. I'm not going anywhere."

And he could only hope that Draco wouldn't, either.

****

Monday morning found Draco in abnormally high spirits. Harry had wandered in a full fourteen minutes late, a fact that Draco hadn't commented on even before he found out that Harry had been held up buying cheese Danishes for Draco.

"You seem unusually chipper this morning," Harry commented as he set the box on Draco's desk.

"Yes, well," Draco said. "It seems that spending the entire weekend in bed with a gorgeous man will do that to me." He'd even blown off Sunday lunch with his parents while Harry had skipped his weekly Weasley visit, and it had been brilliant. He bit into his Danish and hummed in appreciation. "These are amazing. You've got to tell me where you're getting them."

Harry grinned. "But if I don't, you're forced to keep me around."

"I keep you around for more than pastries, Potter," Draco said with a slow smirk. "You demonstrated that quite aptly earlier this morning."

Harry seemed a little thrown by Draco's blatant references to their relationship during the workday, but his grin broadened. "I've got plans to demonstrate it again when we get home tonight."

"You're insatiable," Draco said with a faint leer. He rather liked that about Harry.

Harry laughed. "When it comes to you, absolutely."

They both settled into their paperwork for the morning, but Draco found he had a hard time concentrating. His gaze kept straying across the room to Harry, and every time his eyes fell

on him, Draco couldn't help but smile as a giddy feeling bubbled up behind his ribs. He loves me, he thought.

Draco was glad that Harry had told him, although he'd admitted afterward that he hadn't actually meant to say the words, which had explained why he'd looked as shocked as Draco felt to hear them come popping out of his mouth. As they lay together on the sofa after shagging, Harry had explained about being old together and Draco still complaining about the tea, and Draco had absently scraped a nail through the come drying on Harry's belly and replied, "I'm sure that won't happen. I'm positive I'll teach you to brew tea properly before even one hair on your head has turned grey." And Harry had just chuckled and kissed his forehead and told him, "Well I'm sure you'll find something else to bitch about."

Although he may not have meant to say it the first time, he meant it the second time he said it, holding Draco's hand on the sofa. And the third time, as he held Draco close that night after they'd had sex again. And the fourth time, whispered against Draco's lips just that morning right before Draco had ducked through the Floo to his own flat to shower and dress for work. Draco wasn't ready to say it back because he wanted to mean it with every inch of himself when he finally said those words, but he still wanted to do something to show Harry how much he cared. That even though he couldn't bring himself to apply the word 'love' to his feelings, they still ran deep.

He slipped one hand into his pocket and ran the his fingertip over the ridged edge of his bottle cap, and the answer popped into his head so suddenly and unexpectedly that he sat up straight and jerked his hand free of his trousers. Yes, that was it. He stood and started for the door.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked, concern shading his voice.

"Toilet," Draco said and hurried into the hall without even bothering to put on his Auror robes first.

One quick Floo-Call later, Draco had an appointment booked for four-thirty on Friday. He went back to his office with a spring in his step and a flutter of nervous excitement settled in his belly.

"Everything all right?" Harry asked as Draco shut the door behind him.

"Hm?" Draco asked, belatedly remembering how he'd gone running out of here as well as his excuse for doing so. "Oh, yes. I'm fine. Everything's fine. Stomach's just a little…" He trailed off and wobbled one hand in midair. "You know."

He settled back behind his desk and began sorting through his paperwork. Across the room, Harry watched him suspiciously for a few moments before doing the same.

****

On Friday afternoon, just past four o'clock, Draco stood and stretched. Harry looked up from Patricia Porterson's customer records and blinked as Draco reached for his robes.

"Where are you going?"

"I have an appointment," Draco said, doing up his buttons.

"What appointment?" Harry asked with a frown. "You didn't tell me about any appointments."

Draco's hands stilled momentarily as he raised his eyebrows. "Are you my secretary, Potter? I don't tell you everything, you know." He slipped the last few buttons through their holes. "I won't be able to make it to the pub tonight, I'm afraid, but you should go without me."

"Oh," Harry said uncertainly. "Um. All right."

Draco nodded to him, then paused with one hand on the doorknob. "Why don't you come over to mine tonight. Say, around eight? I should be finished by then." He swept out of the room without waiting for a reply, leaving Harry more than a little baffled behind him.

He tried not to worry about it, he really did, but Harry couldn't help it. Draco never left work early, for any reason. And he certainly never kept secrets from Harry. He'd even told Harry about the optometrist's appointment he'd booked over his lunch break last Tuesday, why would he hide this one? For a moment, Harry worried that Draco had discovered something about the investigation. But no, if he had he certainly wouldn't have invited Harry over to his place, and there'd have been a lot more shouting besides.

Harry sighed and bent his head back to his paperwork, but he couldn't concentrate. He'd only made it through another two folders when someone knocked on his office door at a quarter to six. He flicked his wand and the door swung open. Even so, Ron was cautious as he peered inside.

"It's safe," Harry said dryly. "He's not even here."

"Really?" Ron asked and looked around the small room as if Draco might be hiding behind the sofa. "But it's pub night."

"I know," Harry said. He picked up a green hoodie from the pile behind his desk and yanked it over his head. "He said he had an appointment and couldn't make it." He forced a bright smile. "So it's just me tonight."

Thankfully, Ron let it go. Harry tried his best to let it go as well.

****

Draco hurried to his door at five minutes to eight and pulled it open to reveal Harry standing on his front stoop. His face lit up in a nervous smile as soon as he saw Draco.

“Hi,” he said as he stepped inside.

“Hello,” Draco replied and shut the door. He turned to find Harry looking around, and realized with a small start that he’d never had Harry over to his place before. “Shall I give you the long tour or the short one?”

Harry glanced at him over his shoulder. “What’s the difference?”

“Long tour, I show you the house. Short tour, we skip straight to the bedroom.” Draco let his gaze heat as he swept it from Harry’s head to his toes and back up again. “Your choice.”

“Short tour, please,” Harry said, and kissed Draco soundly.

He’d been drinking cider at the pub, Draco noted as Harry swept his tongue against Draco’s, and something else. Whiskey, perhaps? Maybe scotch? Whatever it was, it gave a darker, smokier flavor to the bright apple taste of the cider. Harry broke away, breathing heavily.

“Bedroom?”

Draco took him by the hand and together they went up the curving staircase to the second level, down the hall, and into the bedroom. Harry barely spared the rest of the room a glance before he dragged Draco over to the large four poster bed and shoved him onto it.

“It’s funny,” he said as he clambered up and straddled Draco’s hips. “I would’ve thought you’d have done it up in Slytherin greens.”

Draco stretched against the pale blue duvet, tucking one hand lazily beneath his head. “I really should. A nice emerald, I think, to match your eyes.”

Harry leaned forward and captured Draco’s wrists, pinning them to the mattress. “Don’t you dare,” he said. “You look brilliant against this blue.”

He went back to kissing Draco, and Draco let him even though he was dying to take off his shirt. After what felt like ages, Harry finally let got of his wrists and fumbled at the small buttons fastening his waistcoat. Draco sat up to shrug it off, and Harry leaned back a little to undo the buttons on Draco’s shirt. He jerked it down Draco’s shoulders, leaving Draco to shake it the rest of the way off as he went for the hem of Draco’s undershirt. He’d gotten it halfway up Draco’s chest when Draco freed his right arm from its sleeve and Harry saw it.

He let the undershirt fall back to Draco’s waist as he slowly reached for Draco’s wrist and tilted it to get a better look at his forearm. “When did you get this?”

Draco looked down at the fourteen dots and the faint lines sketched between them that stood out black from the pale skin of his forearm. “I told you I had an appointment.” He smiled at the delightedly surprised expression on Harry’s face. “Go on, touch it.”

Carefully, Harry reached out and stroked his finger over the dot closest to his wrist. It blossomed into a stylized star, then slowly folded back in on itself to become a dot again.

“Do you recognize it?” Draco asked.

Harry laughed. “Of course I recognize your constellation. I took the same astronomy classes you did, you arse.” He stroked his fingertip over the dot again, and watched it blossom and fade.

“Watch,” Draco said.

He swept the palm of his hand down his arm from elbow to wrist so all the dots unfurled into stars at once, and the faint outline of a dragon appeared around them for a few seconds before fading into dots and lines again. The surprise on Harry’s face had begun to heat into a slow hunger that Draco knew well from watching Harry watch his other tattoo.

“I’m really glad you like it,” he murmured.

Harry’s eyes snapped up to meet his and for a moment he only gaped. “You got this for me?”

Draco shifted slightly on the bed, suddenly a little uncomfortable. “It’s something I’ve been thinking about getting for a while. But yes, I got it now because I thought you’d like it.” He cleared his throat. “I don’t love you,” he said. “Not yet, but I wanted to show you…”

He trailed off when Harry gave a disbelieving laugh. “You’ve permanently marked your body to show that you don’t love me? You’re mad, utterly mad, and I love every barmy inch of you.”

“I told you, it was something I wanted anyhow,” Draco had time to protest before Harry was kissing him again.

Things progressed quickly from there until Harry got Draco’s trousers off and reached a hand behind him and found him already slick and loose. He hesitated, breaking off the kiss to look down at Draco.

“Did you…?”

Draco felt his cheeks warm as he remembered working lubed fingers into his arse just before eight o’clock, and how deliciously naughty it’d felt as he pulled his trousers back up and refastened them. “I assumed that we’d end up here before too long. I know how you are about tattoos.”

“Just yours,” Harry said. “My first boyfriend had tattoos and they didn’t get to me nearly this way.” He brought Draco’s arm to his mouth and licked a broad stripe down his wrist, stars blossoming beneath his tongue.

Draco felt a warm curl of possessive pleasure at Harry’s words, colored with only the faintest hint of jealousy. Harry was his. Harry loved him. No one else mattered, no one else in the world.

“So how long have you wanted to get this?” Harry asked.

“A few years,” Draco told him. “I’ve got plans for a few more, you know.”

Harry’s eyes lit up. “Really? What?”

Draco hummed. “I think I’ll leave that a surprise,” he said, and kissed Harry before he could protest.

Afterward, they lay together, with Harry gently stroking Draco’s ribs so that the dragon tattoo reacted. Draco sighed when it twisted in on itself and then turned around and stretched so that its head sat near his hipbone and the tip of its tail curled up to his shoulder.

“It’ll take me ages to get him to turn the right way up again,” he complained.

Harry kissed Draco’s shoulder, and the dragon tattoo flicked its tail away from him. “Don’t worry, it’ll be my pleasure to get him turned around.” He swiped a finger down Draco’s ribs, and the dragon snapped at him.

Draco watched him with an amused little smile. “Frankly, Potter, this obsession of yours with my tattoo is somewhat…”

“Flattering?” Harry offered hopefully, looking up from his task. “Endearing?” He grinned at Draco and waggled his eyebrows. “Sexy?”

Draco couldn’t help but laugh. “I was going to say worrisome, but I suppose I’ll let you have one of those other adjectives as well.”

“I’d like to go with sexy then, if you don’t mind. I think that’ll be best for my chances of getting laid again tonight.”

Draco snorted. “You are so—“

“Wonderful? Amazing?” Harry put in. He tipped his head to one side peered up at Draco through his fringe in what Draco assumed was meant to be a smoldering look, the effects of which were utterly ruined by the way the corners of Harry’s mouth twitched as he fought back a smile. “Sexy?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Exasperating.”

Harry snickered. “What, you’re not going to let me have an extra adjective again?”

“No.”

Harry prodded Draco in the ribs. “Come on. It’d do wonders for my self-esteem. Think of it as your good deed for the day.”

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” he said gravely.

Harry waggled his eyebrows again. “Yes, but the path to blowjobs is paved with excessive flattery.”

Draco snorted. “Shall I break out my thesaurus then?”

Harry propped himself up on his elbows and looked at Draco eagerly. “Oh yes please. You know nothing excites me more than a man reading aloud from a reference book. I think it’s a weird holdover from spending so much time with Hermione during my formative years.”

For a moment, Draco honestly couldn’t tell whether or not Harry was serious. But then Harry’s eyes sparkled mischievously, and Draco decided to play along. “All right then. Hm, let’s see. I suppose it’s best to go alphabetically. Assertive. Brilliant. Courageous.”

Harry bent his head to nibble at Draco’s collarbone, and for a moment Draco forgot what came after C.

“Go on, then,” Harry whispered against his skin.

“Dashing. Um. Exasperating.”

Harry grimaced. “Oh, I’m flattered.”

Draco grinned. “Flattering. Good. Hard.”

“Hard?” Harry murmured and shifted his hips to press his cock against Draco’s thigh. He rocked against him.

“Hard-headed,” Draco corrected. “And irritating.”

Harry laughed. “And insulted.”

“Irksome,” Draco gasped as Harry bit at his neck. “Infuriating. Ingrate.”

Harry laughed again. “I’m supposed to be grateful, now?”

“I’m about to let you shag me again, aren’t I?” Draco pointed out. “You should be.”

The teasing smile faded from Harry’s face, and he reached up and cupped Draco’s cheek in one palm. “I am,” he said. “I’m so grateful for every moment with you.” He swallowed. “Draco, I’m in love with you, so much it feels impossible, and I’m afraid that I won’t be able to make you see just how much, and…”

“Harry,” Draco interrupted, made suddenly uncomfortable by the frightening intensity in Harry’s eyes and the serious turn their conversation had taken. “Shut up and kiss me.”

For a moment, Harry looked like he might argue, but then he just nodded and whispered, “Okay,” and did as he was told.

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Harry woke the next morning and opened his eyes to an unfamiliar canopy. He blinked a few times before he groped for his glasses and slid them on. He was in Draco's bed, in Draco's home, but he didn't see Draco anywhere. He slid a hand over the sheets on the other side of the bed and found them cool. A few moments later, the faint rush of a running shower registered. Harry sighed and snuggled deeper under the covers.

A minute later, the shower turned off and Draco came back into the room wearing only a towel tucked neatly around his waist. He moved quietly, carefully sliding open drawers of his bureau, obviously trying not to disturb Harry. For a moment, he considered letting Draco know that he didn't need to bother with keeping quiet, but then Draco dropped his towel and Harry decided that he'd much rather just enjoy the show.

He watched as Draco dragged a clean white undershirt over his head, hiding the dragon from view, then pulled on a pair of black underpants, which meant either the white shirt and the black waistcoat with silver pinstripes, or the black shirt and the black waistcoat with all the little gold buttons up the front. Harry hoped for the latter; he liked Draco in unrelieved black nearly as much as he liked him in blue.

Draco wandered into his closet and Harry listened to the faint rustle of cloth being pulled from hangers, then Draco returned wearing a pair of black trousers, the fly hanging undone, and – yes! – the black shirt. He shrugged into it, covering up his scarred left arm and his tattooed right arm, and as he fastened the buttons at the cuffs, Harry realized that somewhere in watching Draco dress, he'd grown uncomfortably hard.

It was somewhat disconcerting to realize that he found Draco dressing nearly as arousing as Draco undressing, but there it was. Draco finished with the buttons on his shirt and tucked it in before he fastened his trousers and pulled on his waistcoat, every movement quick and efficient. He was putting on more than clothes, hiding more than his body as he dressed.

Draco had walked into the bedroom, with his pale skin flushed from his shower, scars and tattoos on unashamed display. Draco, who laughed with Harry and came up with alphabetical lists of adjectives for him and kissed him like he'd die if he went another second without it. Draco was warm and soft and open and heartbreakingly, terrifyingly vulnerable.

But as he cast charms to dry and smooth his rumpled hair, Draco had almost completed the transformation to what Harry thought of as Malfoy. His black clothes made him look severe, the dark color sharpening the angles of his features. He looked perfectly composed, and serious, and more than a bit haughty. He looked like the type of person who never smiled, though Harry knew better.

It lit his blood to know that he was the one who could strip away those layers Draco cloaked himself in, peeling them off as easily as he could remove the fussy clothing from Draco's body.

Draco picked up the small array of things from the top of his dresser and slid them into his pockets one by one: glasses, handkerchief, keys, and a small round something Harry couldn't quite make out. As he settled the chain of his pocket watch into an elegant curve over the flat plane of his stomach, he glanced over at Harry and caught him watching.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said.

"You didn't," Harry said. "Why are you up?"

Draco scowled. "You can blame Weasley and his arsehole partner for that. They found another safe house and called me in as consult. On my bloody day off, I might add. I'm sure this is Smith's doing."

"Oh. Shall I come along?" Harry offered. He propped himself up on his elbows.

Draco shook his head. "Don't bother. I'll take a look around, ward the place, and we can deal with it together on Monday." He glanced down to where Harry's erection tented the bed sheets and smirked. "Think you can hold on until then?"

"I like watching you dress," Harry said.

"Watching me dress?" Draco repeated, bemused.

"Yes," Harry said. "It's like you're two people, and I'm watching you change from one to the other."

Draco's eyebrows lifted. "You've lost me, I'm afraid."

"There's Draco, and there's Malfoy," Harry said, and Draco didn't look any less confused, which Harry supposed was fair because he really wasn't explaining this very well. His aching cock made it hard to think straight, and he slid his hand down under the sheets to give it a squeeze. "And Malfoy's cold and distant and kind of a bastard, and that incredible self-control you've got." He swallowed and gasped a little as he palmed his cock. "And then there's Draco, and when you're him you're the bloke who spends all weekend in bed with me, and can always be won over by takeaway curry, and I'm so in love with him it's almost painful."

Draco said nothing, but he stepped a little closer.

"And it's like with the duel, there you were all tightly-reined anger and you looked so bloody dangerous, and all I could think of was how that morning you'd smiled at me and lay back and let me fuck you, and that fucking tattoo on your side, and your Mark and all your scars." Harry was rambling now, unsure if what he said made any sense at all but he kept talking because he wanted Draco to understand. He groped for better words. "It's the juxtaposition of it all, between who you are and the front you put up for everyone but me. It drives me mad."

Draco came to a stop by the side of the bed. "And am I to take it that you like it when I'm Malfoy?"

Harry nodded eagerly. “Yes, because I know you don’t really mean it with me. I know what you’re like underneath. The same way I like it when you call me Potter, because I know you think of me as Harry.”

Draco regarded him evenly. “You're an odd one, aren’t you, Potter?” he asked flatly. “I treat you warmly, and that makes you like it more when I hold you at arm’s length. You’re obsessed with my tattoo when I’m in my altogether, and when I’m dressed you’re obsessed with the fact that you can’t see it.”

“Tattoos. Plural,” Harry said. “You’ve got more than one now.”

Draco’s mouth quirked in the barest smile before he fought it back to a grim line, still playing along with Harry. “So I have. However, it doesn’t change the fact that you’re very strange.”

Draco put his hand over the fist Harry had wrapped around his cock and pressed down, and Harry’s hips gave a helpless twitch up into the pressure. He nearly came undone when Draco looked down his long nose at him with a faint sneer curling his lip, leaning close.

“I expect to find you right here when I get back, because I have every intention of continuing this very enlightening conversation.” He removed his hand from Harry’s groin and straightened. “I shouldn’t be more than an hour.”

He turned and swept out of the room, his bare feet padding soundlessly across the dark wood floor.

“Oh my god,” Harry said and stroked himself hard and fast. It only took a few minutes to bring himself off.

After the warm lethargy of his orgasm faded and he’d cast cleaning charms on Draco’s sheets, Harry stood up and stretched and looked around Draco’s bedroom. Draco kept it as neat as he kept his side of the office at the Ministry, all of the mahogany furniture bright and free of dust and clutter. Harry wandered into the bathroom to relieve his bladder, then hesitated.

Draco had left him here alone because he trusted Harry. But Harry knew that he wouldn’t get a better chance to search around Draco’s flat, like he’d told Kingsley he was angling to do all along. A surge of guilt flared through him, and Harry quashed it. They were going to search Draco’s flat anyhow, right? Wouldn’t it be better for Harry to do it rather than some faceless Auror armed with a search warrant and a grudge against Death Eaters? If Harry had the search on record before he removed himself from the case, then it would stand and no one else would come back to do it again after him. It was better this way.

Swallowing his distaste, Harry opened Draco’s medicine cabinet and sifted through the neatly labeled single-dose bottles. Hangover Potion, Headache Tonics, Dreamless Sleep. Nothing out of the ordinary, though Harry was somewhat concerned with the amount of Dreamless Sleep, given its addictive nature. He made a mental note to bring that up with Draco later. He’d say he was looking for something for a headache. He took one of the bottles of Headache Tonic and dumped it down the sink to corroborate his story before he searched the rest of the cabinets.

In the bedroom he paused to pull on his underpants and the green button-up Draco had worn yesterday. He fastened the middle three buttons and rolled up the sleeves before he poked through Draco's bureau and bedside tables. He felt another flash of guilt when he discovered that Draco kept his borrowed copy of *The Once And Future King* in the drawer beside his bed. There was a bookmark tucked between the pages about halfway through, and Harry imagined Draco reading a few chapters in bed before turning out the light and rolling over and settling in to sleep. Harry slid the drawer shut with a thud and turned his attention to the rest of the room. The clothing in the drawers of Draco's bureau were neatly folded. In Draco's closet, he wasn't at all surprised to find all the clothes hung in rainbow order.

The rest of Draco's end terrace didn't take long to search. Everything was neatly organized, and Harry idly wished that all of his suspects had such tidy homes. It'd make his job so much easier. He felt briefly guilty at the thought, then quickly pushed it away. This was to help Draco, ultimately. Harry knew that Draco had nothing to hide, and he was afraid Kingsley might take him off the case if he didn't keep submitting new evidence. Harry just needed to hang on to it long enough to turn over to Ron. Really, this was all to help Draco in the long run.

His search turned up nothing of interest, until he went down into the basement. Draco had converted the entire space into a potions lab, though all of the cauldrons sat cold and empty at the moment. Draco probably hadn't been home long enough to work on anything recently, Harry thought, what with him spending all of his free time in Harry's bed. He looked through the glass-fronted cabinets of ingredients, and noted almost all of the things necessary for brewing up a batch of Verve. A small desk sat in the far corner, and Harry found three leather-bound journals of notes. He chose a few pages at random, detailing some obscure research about the effects of Veritaserum, because he had to turn in *something*, and one quick Duplicating Charm later, Harry left the basement just as he'd found it.

He shrunk the handful of pages and tucked them securely into the pocket of his trousers before he went back to the kitchen and began sorting through the cabinets there.

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The bloody Apparition coordinates were off.

At least, that was what Draco had assumed until he'd tried to Apparate closer and found he couldn't. A few sensing charms confirmed the Anti-Apparation ward that blanketed the area. This was as close as he could get by magic.

Draco blamed that on Smith, repeatedly and emphatically as he slogged along a muddy path toward the house he saw in the distance. The cold mud squelched and slid under him, and he nearly lost his footing twice. Several times he unexpectedly sank several inches into the muck and the freezing mud seeped into his shoes. Already his toes had grown painfully cold and were rapidly nearing numb, despite the warming charms Draco had aimed at his feet.

“Hello there, Malfoy,” Smith said cheerfully, confirming Draco’s suspicions. “Have a nice walk?”

“Sorry, Malfoy,” Weasley said, ignoring his partner. “We don’t really need you here, but he put in the request without telling me.”

“It’s fine, isn’t it Malfoy?” Smith said. “I know you haven’t got anything better to do with your Saturday morning.”

Draco ignored him and swallowed down his irritation. He thought he’d put an end to Smith being an arsehole with that duel. He should have known that such a public humiliation would only have him redoubling his efforts to get under Draco’s skin. Really, he should have seen it coming, because back at Hogwarts hadn’t he redoubled his own efforts every time Harry bested him? Biting back a sigh, he turned to the house, shook his wand into his hand with a practiced flick of his wrist, and set to work dismantling the wards. A few minutes later, the last of them fell, and Draco turned to Smith and Weasley.

“It’s unwarded now. You should be able to cast the detection spells without any interference now, though the wards didn’t feel like they’d been touched in years,” Draco said. “Ward it up again when you’re done, and Harry and I will deal with the rest of it on Monday.”

“Thanks, Malfoy,” Weasley began.

“I don’t think so,” Smith interrupted. “I insist that we check the inside. It’s protocol to thoroughly check any suspicious areas.” He paused to aim a nasty smile at Draco. “I believe in being thorough.”

Draco glowered at him, his temper fraying. “Let it go, Smith. You’ve had your fun. You’ve dragged me out of bed on my day off. A bed that, I might add, was occupied by someone other than myself—“

“What’s the matter?” Smith asked cheerfully. “Haven’t paid her for the night yet?”

For a moment, Draco saw red, and only Weasley’s hand clamping down around his wrist stopped him from hexing the stupid bastard.

“I for one don’t want to hear anything more about who may or may not be in Malfoy’s bed,” he said. “We don’t need him for this, Smith.”

Draco flushed slightly at that. Weasley already knew who was waiting for him at home.

Smith sighed theatrically. “It’ll look bad on his record, though, when I report that he declined a direct request for assistance.”

Weasley stared at him. “I don’t know what your bloody obsession with needling him is, but you need to stop. One day you’re going to poke at him and he’s going to turn around and bite your hand off.”

While Draco resented the implication that he was little more than an ill-tempered dog, he had to admit that there was some amount of truth to it. Yes, he’d gotten far better at reining in his

temper since his youth, but even he still had his limits.

“It’s fine,” he ground out. “I’ll just pop in and make sure it’s fine.”

“I don’t trust you,” Smith said. “We really ought to come along.”

Draco nearly argued, but sighed instead. He wanted nothing more than to get this over with so he could get back to his home. An image of Harry flittered through his mind, tucked snugly beneath the covers on Draco’s bed, his hard cock pushing up at the blankets. Draco wondered whether he was still there. He hoped so.

“Fine,” he said. “Don’t touch anything. I mean that.”

Weasley gave the fingers of his right hand a rub. “Believe me, mate, once with a curse was enough,” he said.

Without waiting for Smith to respond, Draco strode up the front walk, flung a series of detecting charms at the porch, and activated the spell that would safely open the door and light up the protected path through the house.

“Don’t touch the door, don’t touch the doorjamb, don’t step on the threshold,” he said. “And don’t leave the path.”

He moved through the entryway quickly, casting detection spells as he went, making note of the curses and traps he found. Based on the ones around the door, he suspected that this was another Carrow house, and they never bothered to set up timed triggers. Still, Draco wanted to check for himself. In the sitting room, he came across a densely layered cluster of curses and had to slow down. Smith began to gripe.

“You’re the one who insisted that I do this,” Draco couldn’t help but point out. “And don’t leave the path!”

Smith snorted and wandered just inside the safe path’s limits. “Touchy, touchy,” he chided. “You must be eager to get back to your whore.”

Draco snapped. He cast a wordless, wandless Tripping Jinx before he could even think to stop himself. Smith stumbled over his own feet and threw out a hand to catch himself. His palm slapped against the large ornately framed mirror hung on the wall just beside him and he fell through it.

“Fuck!” Weasley swore as Draco came running over.

For a moment, Draco panicked, but then he saw Smith in the mirror, yelling soundlessly and pounding his fists against the glass. Oh thank Merlin, it was just a Trapping Glass. It was a struggle to not let his relief show. He turned away from the mirror.

“He’ll be fine in there,” he said to Weasley, shoving down a wave of irritation with himself for allowing his control to lapse. If Smith had been seriously hurt in a Death Eater safe house, Draco didn’t even want to imagine what would have happened to him. Azkaban, at the very least. “We’ll get him on the way out.”

They quickly finished searching the house, and Draco released Smith from the mirror. He sputtered wordlessly for a moment, then went storming outside.

“I’ll just be off, then,” Draco said. “I’m sure you two can finish up on your own.”

Weasley sighed. “Say hi to Harry for me.”

Draco nodded to him and Apparated on the spot. As he landed in his front entryway, he took a moment to be thankful that the Anti-Apparition ward only prohibited Apparating in, not out. Then he toed off his shoes and cast a series of cleaning spells on his trousers, getting rid of the muck that spattered the lower six inches. They came clean, but remained puckered and wrinkled. Draco hoped a good laundering would rescue them. The shoes, he Vanished with a pang of regret. Such a shame; he’d really liked those shoes.

He started up the stairs for his bedroom, but the clatter of a plate on a countertop gave him pause. He went into the kitchen where he found Harry in front of the stove, wearing nothing but Draco’s shirt as he prodded at something in a pan with a spatula.

“Hey there,” he said, smiling at Draco over his shoulder. “I made us some breakfast. Hope you don’t mind I went through your cabinets.” He flipped over the flapjack in the pan.

“Hm. I suppose I may be willing to forgive you, but only because you’ve made bacon,” Draco said, swiping one from the plate on the counter. He bit into it and found it perfectly crunchy, exactly the way he liked. “Mmm. I recall telling you to wait for me in my bed, but I think I might have to keep you here instead.” He slipped a hand under the tail of Harry’s stolen shirt and was disappointed to find him wearing underpants. Draco Vanished them, and Harry flinched. “I like you in nothing but my shirt,” he murmured in Harry’s ear as he slid his hand back under the shirt to cup Harry’s bum.

Harry leaned back against him. “I like it too. However.” He shifted away from Draco’s hand. “I can’t leave the stove unattended right now. Breakfast first, then shagging.”

Draco heaved a put-upon sigh. “Fine,” he said. “But only because you’ve made bacon.”

He stole another piece, then turned to fill his tea kettle from the tap. Harry might make perfect bacon, but he still couldn’t be trusted to make a proper cup of tea.

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Harry woke up screaming. He was a little surprised it hadn’t happened before now, actually. He didn’t usually go this long without nightmares. He sat up, his skin clammy, his shirt damp and sticking to his back. Beside him, Draco rolled over and turned on the light. He watched Harry without speaking for a moment, then pushed himself out of bed.

“Stay there,” he said, and disappeared into the hall.

Harry dropped his head to his knees and tried to clear his head. He'd dreamed of the Battle of Hogwarts again, vague impressions of screaming and death that solidified into the Forbidden Forest and Voldemort, and a jet of green racing at Harry. It was over, he was safe, he told himself. The war was over. He shivered.

A minute later, Draco returned with a mug in his hand. He went to his bureau and pulled out a clean shirt and tossed it to Harry.

"Put that on," he said, and waited while Harry obeyed. "Here."

Harry took the mug Draco held out to him and wrapped his hands around it, letting the bright sting of hot water through porcelain ground him. He took a small sip and burned his tongue.

"You made it too hot," he said.

"I made it properly," Draco said, but he aimed a mild cooling charm at the mug before sliding back into bed beside him and scooting so close that his thigh pressed against Harry's. They leaned back against the headboard together. "Would you like to talk about it?"

Harry shrugged. "Not really. It's just the war." He looked down into his tea. "You can go back to sleep, if you want. You don't need to sit up with me."

"It's fine. We have to be up for work in an hour anyhow," Draco said and went silent for a few moments. "I still dream about the Fiendfyre most often, myself. And about Nagini."

"I dream about dying," Harry said.

Draco slid his palm, warm and comforting, over Harry's leg. "At least it's just a dream."

"It's not," Harry said and gripped his mug tighter. "I really did die." He sucked in a deep breath and couldn't look at Draco. "The second time he cast the Killing Curse at me, in the Forest. Everyone thinks it didn't work, but it did. I just… came back, after."

Draco went silent for a few moments. "What's it like?" he asked.

And Harry could have kissed him for it. There was no pity in his voice, no horror or revulsion or disbelief at what Harry had been through. Just simple curiosity.

"It was nice," he said. "Calm and bright and quiet. I nearly didn't. Um, come back, I mean."

Draco's fingers curled around his thigh. "I'm glad you did."

"Me too," Harry said. He took another sip of tea and didn't burn his tongue this time. The nightmare was fading fast in the warm glow of the lamp on Draco's bedside table, and the rest of it – the clean shirt, the tea, the quiet companionship of Draco beside him – gave him an easy sense of comfort that he didn't think he'd ever found before. "How did you know exactly what I needed?"

"Because it's what I always wish I had someone to do for me when I wake up from nightmares of the war," Draco said, and his eyes slid away from Harry. "And don't worry,

you'll get your chance to reciprocate sooner or later."

Harry thought of those bottles of Dreamless Sleep in Draco's medicine cabinet and nodded. Draco had assured him they weren't addictive, but Harry still didn't like him taking them. "Thank you."

"You know," Draco said. "Given all the shit we've been through, we really are two remarkably well-adjusted individuals."

Harry smile wryly. "I don't feel like it sometimes."

"Sometimes I don't either," Draco admitted with a sigh. "There are days when I feel like I'm barely holding myself together. Perhaps that's why we're so good together. You understand me like no one else." He leaned his shoulder heavily against Harry's. "And I understand you."

Harry thought so too, and was glad. Because they really did understand each other. They fit together perfectly. Harry sighed a little and slid down just enough to rest his head on Draco's shoulder, and Draco brushed a gentle kiss against his hair.

Everything would be okay. He and Draco would be fine. Harry just had to believe that everything would work out okay in the end.

Chapter 14

The next few days passed quickly until finally, with Draco's birthday behind now them, Harry had no more excuses for putting off his confession.

They'd had a wonderful time on Monday night. Harry had made reservations at a fancy French place in Muggle London and the best part of it was getting to hold Draco's hand in public and know that any disapproving looks they got were because they were both men, not because of the Mark on Draco's arm or the scar on Harry's head. After dinner, they went back to Harry's flat, where they'd had some truly spectacular sex, during which Harry did his best to ignore the fact that it might be their last time together. Afterward, he gave Draco his present.

It'd been a challenge to pick out a gift for him. After all, what do you give to someone who can buy anything he wants for himself? Eventually he'd settled on something sappy and sentimental and completely intangible. A few months earlier, Hermione had mentioned finding a website where people could register to name stars. A few clicks later, Harry had registered for one to be named one after Draco, and presented him with the certificate and a small chart detailing exactly where to find his star while they sat together in Harry's rumpled bed.

"You're named after some of them, it seems fitting for one of them to get named after you," he'd said, and Draco had kissed him hard and pushed him back down onto the mattress. The certificate got crumpled, and neither of them had cared.

Now, on Tuesday, Harry had been jumpy and anxious all day. Draco had noticed and pressed him about it a few times, but so far Harry had managed to deflect his questions.

"Do you mind if we take some work home with us?" Draco asked at the end of the day, and Harry's heart clenched at his casual assumption that yes, of course they'd be going home together.

Harry nodded. "That's fine."

When they arrived at his flat and took off their shoes and set down their bags, Draco turned to Harry, his eyes dark and serious and his mouth pressed into a small frown.

"What's bothering you?" he asked. "You've been agitated all day."

And there it was, the perfect opening. This was where he told Draco everything.

But when he opened his mouth the words didn't come, and he stepped forward and pulled Draco into an embrace. "I love you," he whispered, and swallowed Draco's protests in a heated kiss.

They tumbled into bed together, and Harry almost managed to ignore the fact that this was definitely their last time together. After, they showered together, and Harry dropped to his

knees in the tub and took Draco into his mouth. Draco had only just come so it took ages to bring him off again, but Harry didn't mind. He stroked and sucked and worked his fingers into Draco's arse until Draco's knees began to tremble alarmingly and his toes curled and his hands fisted in Harry's hair, and finally he spurted a thin dribble of spunk over Harry's tongue. Harry swallowed every drop of it, wanting to keep some small part of Draco inside himself when the rest had gone.

But when he stood up again, his knees creaking painfully after kneeling on the hard porcelain, and Draco gave him that wonderfully sated smile, Harry's bittersweet afterglow was shattered by a sharp lance of guilt. They got out of the shower, and rather than dressing in his own clothing, Draco borrowed a pair of grey pajama bottoms and Harry's red hoodie, and he looked so bloody adorable in it as he asked again, "Now will you tell me what's been bothering you?"

"Later," Harry said, tugging the hood up over Draco's damp hair, and Draco scowled at him and shoved it back down. "After dinner, okay?"

Harry knew he should just tell Draco then, but he needed a little bit of time alone to collect his thoughts and figure out exactly what he was going to say.

He went into the kitchen to start on dinner while Draco settled at the coffee table with his paperwork. He left two chicken breasts frying in a pan while he sliced mushrooms and onions for chicken marsala. As he did, his thoughts kept straying back to what he was going to have to do.

Draco would be livid, there was no doubt in Harry's mind about that. He'd scream at Harry, and tell him what a horrible person he was, and Harry would let him because he really was terrible for doing this to the person he loved. There'd be hexes, of course. And then Harry would beg and try to explain, and Draco would shout at him some more. But Harry hoped that in time Draco would forgive him. Draco took his job as an Auror very seriously and he understood all about duty and following orders. Once he calmed down and Harry explained that Kingsley had ordered him to do it, Harry thought there was a pretty good chance that Draco would let him pick things up where they left off. After a certain amount of groveling on Harry's part, he was sure. But Harry was prepared for that. He'd take it as his due.

He'd certainly miss this until he got it back, he thought as he turned over the chicken in the pan to brown the other side. He and Draco had fallen into a routine, and Harry found it comforting to spend each evening with someone instead of holed up in his lonely flat, doing nothing more exciting than flipping through the stations on his television to find the least stupid program on. It'd be awful, not spending his evenings with Draco for a while, until they worked their way back to where they were now. Awful and lonely.

And cooking. Harry had forgotten just how much he loved cooking. He hated cooking for one, but cooking for two was always a pleasure. Draco loved to tease him about it, asking how he could be such a good cook when he was so awful at potions? Really, Harry had always wondered the same thing.

"Draco," he called. "Do you want a salad with dinner?" Harry waited, but no response came. He frowned. "Draco?" he called again.

Something cold and heavy settled in the bottom of his lungs and he froze with the knife mid-slice through an onion as he listened. He heard nothing but the gentle rustle of pages turning.

Carefully, Harry set down the knife and turned off the burner, then walked to the living room.

Draco sat on the floor in front of the sofa, bright orange folder open on the coffee table and the papers it held spread before him. He looked up as Harry walked in, and Harry stopped short at the expression on Draco's face.

"I was out of Consult Forms, and I was looking for some in your bag, and I saw… It had my name on it," he said, and he sounded so small and helpless. Worst of all, he didn't look angry, just devastated with the slightest bit of confusion, like he couldn't quite believe that this was really happening to him.

"Draco," was all Harry could manage before his throat closed up.

Draco looked back down at the papers in his hands. "All this time," he said. "You've been…" He sucked in a quivering breath. "You've been investigating me for murder."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. He needed to touch Draco. He took a step forward, and Draco scrambled to his feet and took a step back, still clutching papers. "Kingsley assigned me, but I never really thought you—"

"You were watching me, this whole time. You… you searched my flat," Draco said, his voice shaky.

He still didn't look angry, and Harry wished that Draco would yell at him, swear at him, hex him, anything. But all Draco did was stand there and look shattered, and Harry had no idea what to do to make it better. He'd been expecting a fight. He'd been prepared for a fight. He was entirely unprepared for this.

"I'm sorry," he said again, and felt utterly useless. "I…"

"That's all this was to you," Draco cut him off. "Just an investigation." For a moment, Harry didn't know what he meant, but then Draco continued. "I trusted you. You said you loved me and I believed you."

Harry's blood turned to ice in his veins. "Oh god, no. Draco, that's not…"

"I'm so stupid. I can't believe I… I slept with you. You were the first person I…" He coughed out a startled laugh. "I trusted you, and you…" He trailed off, blinking rapidly.

"Draco," Harry said desperately. "That's not true. I love you, you have to believe me."

Draco shook his head. "No, I… I need to leave. I need to go." He dropped the papers onto the floor and went to the Floo.

"Draco, please…" Harry started for him.

“No.” And there was something sharp in his voice that brought Harry up short. Draco fumbled the dish of Floo powder, and it fell to shatter on the hearth. He knelt down, scooped up a handful, threw it into the Floo, and was gone.

For a long moment, Harry stood there. In the thousand scenarios he’d played in his head, he’d never imagined Draco reacting like this. He’d been sure that Draco would turn into Malfoy and they’d have a terrible screaming row complete with hexes and the throwing of breakables. He’d never for an instant thought that Draco would simply break.

Shock, that’s all it was. Draco was just in shock. Harry went into the kitchen and dumped the pan into the rubbish bin, along with the vegetables he’d been slicing. If he gave Draco a few minutes, it would all sink in and then the anger would flare up. He’d go over to Draco’s and they’d have their argument, and then somehow Harry would make him see that this was real.

He’d been trying to prepare himself for the possibility of Draco leaving him for good. He’d made plans to take a step back and let it all settle before he tried to convince Draco to come back to him, and tried to accept there was the possibility that maybe Draco wouldn’t. But now, with Draco gone, he couldn’t do it. He needed Draco. This couldn’t be the end, Harry wouldn’t let it be. He’d just have to make Draco understand, somehow.

He went back to the living room and hit the broken glass with a Reparo. There was a small smudge of blood on part of it. Draco must have cut himself when he’d taken his handful of powder. Harry rubbed the pad of his thumb over the smudge, then steeled his nerves and took his own handful.

“Malfoy End Terrace!” he called and stepped into the flames.

Harry felt a sweet rush of relief when he stepped out into Draco’s sitting room. He hadn’t blocked Harry from his Floo. That was a good sign, wasn’t it? If Draco really wanted nothing more to do with him, he would have locked Harry out. Some part of him must want Harry to come after him.

“Draco?” he called, and his voice fell flat.

He listened, but didn’t hear any sound. Harry’s relief at being allowed in congealed into dread, and he called Draco’s name again. Even though he knew better, Harry searched the house from top to bottom and found it empty.

Draco was gone, and Harry didn’t think he was coming back.

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Draco stumbled a little as he stepped from the Floo, and put out one hand on the mantle to steady himself. His index finger stung, and he looked at it to find that he’d cut it. When had he cut it? Dimly, he remembered the sharp crack of a dish breaking, the bright prick of pain

as he scrabbled for a handful of powder lost in the overwhelming need to *leave*. He stuck his finger into his mouth, tasting the coppery tang of blood and the acrid burn of Floo powder on his tongue.

The unpleasant taste centered him more than the pain in his fingertip, and he took a deep breath.

He'd known he shouldn't look in that orange Top Secret folder. But it had his name on it, Draco sodding Malfoy right across the label, how could he *not* look? Draco wished he hadn't. He wished he'd never read any of those reports penned in Harry's messy hand. The early reports were angry – 'Draco Malfoy is an enormous bastard,' danced through his mind – but the more recent ones had settled into a detached, almost clinical tone as they detailed his habits, and that was worse. Harry described searching his flat, included a copy of his customer records from Unalloyed, talked about his potions notes from his lab. And detailed exactly how he'd pretended to care for Draco in order to get close to him and earn his trust.

Well, it had worked. Draco had trusted him. And that was why this hurt so much.

And the worst part, the absolute worst part, was how even though it felt like Draco's heart had been ripped right out of his chest, he wanted nothing more than to go back to Harry and be held and kissed and comforted. Even though Harry had done this to him, had led him on and lied to him and taken advantage of him, he was still the one that Draco wanted to run to. And wasn't that just pathetic?

Instead, he'd gone running for the only other person in the world who cared about him.

The chill of the marble floor stung his bare feet as he walked down the hall, passing darkened room after darkened room until he reached the end and warm light spilled into the hallway from a fire that burned even in June.

Draco lingered in the doorway. His mother sat on the loveseat by the fire, exactly where he'd expected to find her, the flames making her golden hair glow as she bent her head over her embroidery. He must have made some small sound, because she looked up at him, and her brow furrowed.

"Draco? What on earth are you wearing?"

Draco looked down. He'd forgotten about Harry's stupid pocket shirt, but fuck if he was going back there for his own clothes. He jammed his hands into the pocket and ignored her question. "Is Father home?"

"No, he's out. You know how he gets restless." She regarded him silently for a moment. "What's wrong, darling?"

"Mum," he said, and his voice cracked. "I've fucked up."

It was a testament that he must look as shattered as he felt because she didn't bother to chide him for his language. Instead, she put her sewing aside and patted the cushion beside her, and Draco had the urge to go to her and lay his head on her lap, the way he had when he was a

child and had fallen down and scraped his knee. He wanted to cry and let her stroke his hair and whisper that everything would be fine. He wanted to believe her, like he had before he grew up and learned that not all of life's problems could be fixed with a cuddle and some kisses and a few chocolate biscuits sneaked to him before dinnertime.

He crossed the room and settled onto the other side of the loveseat, curling up in the corner. Narcissa reached out across the few inches of empty cushion that separated them and lay her hand across his bare foot.

"Tell me," she said gently.

"It's…" he began. "I was such a fool."

"Does this have to do with the person you've been seeing?" Narcissa asked carefully.

"Yes," Draco said, and couldn't bring himself to say anything more.

"What has she done?"

Draco hesitated, tempted to lie. But Merlin, he was so tired of lies. "She's not a she."

Narcissa inhaled sharply, and Draco flinched. "He?" she asked.

He nodded miserably. "I'm sorry," Draco said.

Narcissa gave his foot a pat. "You're my son, Draco. You have nothing to apologize for."

He'd been so afraid of coming out to her, so terrified of being met with disgust and disapproval that this unquestioning acceptance nearly undid him. He felt his eyes grow hot with tears and desperately blinked them back. He felt five years old again.

"Thank you," he said, his voice thick.

Narcissa patted his foot again. "You have nothing to thank me for, either. I'm your mother," she said gently.

And it didn't matter that she'd never said it aloud; Draco knew she loved him.

He swallowed. "It's not the worst part, though. That he's a he. It's who he is."

"Oh?"

"Harry Potter," Draco said, and couldn't look at his mother.

"Oh," Narcissa said.

And the rest of it came tumbling out, how they'd become friends and then more than friends, how Draco had never been this deliriously happy in his life. He told her about pub nights and the acceptance of Harry's friends, about takeaway curry and cheese Danishes and envelope

glue flavored Bertie Bott's Beans and the star named after him. He told her all about that orange folder.

Through it all, Narcissa just listened, and when Draco eventually came to a rambling stop, she wordlessly offered him a handkerchief. Draco sniffled and reached for it, and his right sleeve rode up.

"What in heaven's name is that?"

He didn't resist as she pulled his sleeve back to reveal the constellation inked there.

"A mistake," Draco said and blew his nose. "Another great big mistake." He gave a watery laugh. "On the bright side, both of my arms match now."

"Oh, darling," Narcissa said gently.

She didn't say another word as they sat together, her hand warm and steady on his foot, and it was exactly what he needed. This time she didn't tell him that everything was fine, because right now it certainly wasn't. But after a while Draco began to think that maybe, someday, it might be.

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He'd waited for several hours, and Draco still hadn't returned. Harry couldn't take it anymore, couldn't take the silence grating at his nerves or the guilt eating away at his stomach or the rising worry about where Draco was or what he was doing. He turned on his heel and Apparated, appearing on a dark porch.

He raised his hand to knock, then hesitated and dropped his hand, started to walk down the steps, then turned and went back to the door. He raised his hand again, started to lower it a second time, then muttered, "Fuck it," and rapped on the door with his knuckles.

After a few long minutes, the door opened and a slightly baffled Ron poked his head out.

"What are you doing here? It's eleven o'clock at night," he said, then studied Harry for a long moment. "Are you okay?"

"Ron," Harry swallowed. "I fucked up."

"This has got to do with Malfoy, doesn't it?" Ron sighed and pulled the door all the way open. "You'd better come in, then."

He stepped back and Harry followed him inside.

"Ron?" Hermione called from the living room. "Who was at the… Harry? What's wrong?"

“Leave him alone for a minute. You, sit,” he added to Harry.

Harry obediently sat on the sofa while Ron went to the kitchen. Hermione watched him with concern darkening her eyes, and he tried to give her a reassuring smile but that only made her look more anxious. After a moment, Ron returned and handed Harry a tumbler of Firewhisky. Harry sipped from it reflexively, and sighed as it warmed a path down his chest, chasing off a little of the cold dread that squeezed his lungs.

“Did you tell him?” Ron asked.

Harry shook his head and took another sip. “No. He found the folder. All my investigation reports.”

Ron winced. “Oh, mate…”

“Excuse me,” Hermione spoke up, glancing back and forth between them. “Would someone mind explaining what’s going on?”

Harry drained the rest of his glass and set it carefully on the coffee table. “I’ve been sleeping with Draco. For, uh, six weeks now.”

Hermione looked aghast. “But that’s against a dozen rules!”

“Seventeen, actually. But it’s really more like sixteen. Number twelve’s basically the same as number seven, just reworded some.” He sighed at Hermione’s incredulous look. “Draco looked it up.”

“And Harry’s been investigating Malfoy for murder, I might add,” Ron put in.

Hermione stared at him. “For his partners? You think he did it?”

“He didn’t do it,” Harry said. “Kingsley thinks he did, and put me on it, but he didn’t. I’ve been trying to prove he hasn’t.”

“And you’re *sleeping* with him?” Hermione demanded. “Don’t you realize that everything you’ve done so far is now entirely inadmissible—“

“Hermione,” Ron interrupted. “He knows all this. He doesn’t need to hear it again right now.”

“We’re not sleeping together anymore,” Harry said. “We broke up. At least, I think we broke up. He didn’t really say. He just left.” He took and released a deep, shuddering breath. “I don’t know where he went.”

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but sighed and closed it again. She stood up. “I’ll just go make some tea,” she said, and rubbed her hand along Harry’s shoulder as she passed him on her way to the kitchen.

Harry gave her a grateful smile.

“How bad was the fight?” Ron asked over the creak of a cabinet door and the gentle clink of a mug being put on a countertop.

“That’s the thing,” Harry told him. “There was no fight. I thought… I mean, I was sure… But he didn’t even look angry, just…” His throat closed up when he thought of the shattered look on Draco’s face. “You were right. I should have told him right away. I shouldn’t have let him find out like this. I really hurt him and I don’t know if he’ll forgive me for it.” With the painful clarity of hindsight, he couldn’t believe how stupid he’d been, how easily he’d made these poor choices and how ignorant he’d been of what it would lead to. After what he’d done, he couldn’t believe Draco hadn’t hexed him. Harry wanted to hex himself. “I probably wouldn’t forgive me, if I were him.”

Hermione returned with a mug of tea, so quick that Harry knew she’d used magic to make it, and handed it to Harry. That’s when he knew how bad he must look. Hermione always made tea the Muggle way, and he must look pretty awful if she’d been desperate enough to use magic to get a warm mug into his hands a few minutes sooner. He gave her a wan smile as he took it and wrapped his hands around it, letting the warmth seep into his palms. When he took a sip, he didn’t scald his tongue.

“You didn’t make it too hot,” he said, and couldn’t tell if the strangely giddy sound he made was a laugh or a sob. It was probably a laugh, since his eyes were perfectly dry, but why would he be laughing now? “He always…” Harry took another sip.

Ron and Hermione were wonderful. They let him ramble on, and they didn’t try to console him with platitudes when he said awful things about himself, and when he finished his tea Hermione brought him another cup and Ron tipped a splash of whisky into it for him. They offered to let him stay in their spare room, but he declined and shortly before midnight he Apparated away.

Draco’s house was still dark and silent, and Harry knew that he really should go back to his own flat, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. In Draco’s bedroom, he stripped off his trousers and climbed into Draco’s bed, burying his face in Draco’s pillow. It smelled like him, and Harry breathed deeply.

Even so, it was a long time before he slept.

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Draco stumbled out of bed around dawn to call in sick for the first time in his career as an Auror. Not that anyone would miss him, most likely. Although Mrs. Dodson would be on her own for tea. She usually called in a burglary on Wednesdays. And Harry would…

Draco put Harry firmly from his mind as he took another half-dose of Dreamless Sleep – the real stuff, not his half-arsed watered-down version of it, and *fuck* non-addictive – and passed out until noon.

He dressed in one of the spare robes he kept at the Manor, stopped by the gardens to say goodbye to his mother, and left. Lucius was still off somewhere doing only Merlin knew what. Narcissa had informed him that she'd filled in his father on the previous night's conversation and he hadn't taken it well and had gone storming off muttering something about unforgivable insults to the Malfoys. Draco was glad he didn't have to see him, though he hoped Lucius wouldn't go make a scene at the Ministry.

Back at his own home, Draco thought he'd spend the day down in his potions lab. He'd always found it easy to lose himself in brewing, and today he needed that more than ever. He went up to his bedroom to change into his work clothes, and found the bedcovers rumpled. Slowly, he walked up to the bed, and found a single dark hair on the pillow.

Draco Vanished the sheets and blankets with a flap of his wrist, and cast a wandless Accio to summon another set from the linen closet. They were his winter set, soft brown flannel that smelled like the lavender they'd been laundered with and the cedar closet where they'd been stored, and not at all like Harry's skin.

For a moment, the hurt abated and a small thread of hope tickled at the back of his mind. Harry had obviously stayed the night. He'd come after Draco and spent the night in his bed, waiting for him. Didn't that mean he really cared? He wouldn't have come after Draco and slept here if it was just an investigation to him. Maybe their relationship had been real. He pictured Harry's face last night, that stark and desperate expression as he begged Draco to understand.

But then the pain and betrayal came rushing back on a wave of anger, and Draco turned on his heel and stalked from the room.

Downstairs, Draco took a few minutes to lock down his Floo and change the access on his wards. He didn't want any more surprises from Potter. Merlin knew he'd had enough of those to last a lifetime.

****

Harry hoped that Draco's uncompromising work ethic would mean that he'd show up on Wednesday morning. He'd arrived early, well before he knew Draco usually got in, and had a box of cheese Danishes waiting on his desk, along with a scalding hot cup of tea under a strong warming charm. But eight became nine, which became ten, and by eleven Harry finally accepted that Draco wasn't going to show up. He Vanished the tea, ate one of the pastries, and tried not to worry.

When the call from Mrs. Dodson came in, Harry practically leapt at it. Everything in this small room reminded him of Draco and he felt like he'd lose his mind if this went on much longer. He shrugged into his robes and did up the buttons, then realized he'd done them up lopsided, undid them, and did them up again. He hurried to the Apparition Point and a few moments later he stood in front of the dusty junk shop on Diagon Alley.

The off-key jangling of bells announced his arrival as he pushed the door open, and for a moment Harry wondered whether anyone besides Draco and himself ever set foot in this little shop. Shuffling steps and the sharp tap-tap of a cane on the floorboards sounded just before Mrs. Dodson came into view. Harry forced a smile.

“Harry,” she said, peering up at him through her spectacles. “Are you here alone today? Where is Draco?”

“Draco is…” Harry trailed off, because he had no idea where Draco was. “Er, not here,” he finished lamely.

Mrs. Dodson watched him speculatively for a moment, her mouth pursed into an odd little frown. “Shawl pin,” she said at last. “The silver one, shaped like a little octopus.”

With a final nod to him, she bustled away. Harry sighed and turned to face the rest of the shop. Normally with Draco by his side, he’d be smiling and laughing as he and Draco both bragged they’d find it first. But without him the shop seemed cavernous and a little imposing, the steady tick-tick-tick from half a dozen different clocks loud in the silence. Harry thought the sound might drive him mad if he had to listen to it for too long. Funny that he’d never noticed it before today.

Harry sighed to himself and wandered through the shop, pausing by a small cluster of doll’s furniture set atop a small table. Idly, he slid open the top drawer of the tiny bureau and there was a small silver clasp shaped like an octopus. For a moment, he just stared at it, disbelieving. He’d never found anything this quickly before. His first instinct was to snatch it up and gloat to Draco, but Draco wasn’t here. Sighing again Harry picked up the pin and wandered back to the front of the shop where he settled down in Draco’s usual seat. Just the two of them today, no need to fetch the third chair.

Fifteen minutes later, Mrs. Dodson reappeared with the usual tea tray. She seemed surprised to see him sitting, and Harry smiled faintly and held up the pin.

“Found it,” he said, standing, and took the tray from her.

“Wonderful,” she said. “I’m impressed you found it so quickly. I don’t think even Draco ever found something that fast before.” Her tone was casual, but her eyes were sharp as she watched him.

He shrugged. “I guess,” he said, accepting the cup of tea she poured for him.

“I imagine he’d be impressed too, if he were here,” she went on, pouring a cup for herself. “I do hope he’s all right.”

“He’s…” Harry began, and stopped when he realized that he had no idea how Draco was. He pictured the shattered look on Draco’s face, and took a hasty sip of tea.

“He’s been so happy lately,” she continued mildly, and aimed another incongruously sharp glance at him. “Happier than I’ve ever seen him before, with you.”

“I hurt him,” Harry blurted out.

There was a gentle clink of porcelain as Mrs. Dodson put her cup back in its saucer, but otherwise she made no sound. She watched him expectantly as the silence dragged on. Harry knew that Mrs. Dodson knew about him and Draco. Draco had told him as much, but it still felt weird to talk about his relationship with her.

“I… can’t tell you everything. But I hurt him badly. I…” Harry paused and swallowed past the lump in his throat. “I betrayed his trust. And I’m not sure if we can get past it.”

Mrs. Dodson watched him quietly for a long moment, then reached out and pressed her hand over his. Her palm was soft and smooth and cool against his knuckles. “He’ll forgive you,” she said.

Harry blinked at her and frowned. He wanted so badly to believe her. “How can you know that?”

“Because I see the way he watches at you when you’re not looking,” she said. “And I see the way you look at him. Harry, dear, I’m old enough to recognize when two people belong together, as you do with him. And he’s one of the smartest wizards I’ve ever had the pleasure to meet. He knows what he has, and he’s smart enough to hold onto it, when the hurt subsides.” She paused and gave his hand a pat. “And he’s very much a Slytherin, you know. If you’ve hurt him as badly as you seem to think you have, and you’re truly as sorry as I think you are, he’s cunning enough to realize the position he has you in. You’ll do anything for him right now, am I correct?” She paused again, and Harry nodded eagerly. “He’ll know that, and that’s the lure that will draw him back to you. It will put him in the position of power in your relationship in the short term, and give him the security he needs to heal while your relationship balances out again.”

It took Harry a moment to turn that over in his mind. “You seem to know Slytherins pretty well,” he said with the first genuine smile he’d given since yesterday.

Mrs. Dodson *tsked*. “I ought to; I was one for seven years.”

Harry blinked at her. “Really?” Even as he said it, he found he wasn’t really all that surprised. Of course she was, and it all made a strange sort of sense.

“Really,” she assured him. “Now, have a biscuit. You really are far too thin and I’ve got those chocolate ones you like so much.” She edged the plate toward him, and Harry did as he was told and took one.

****

Draco spent most of Wednesday in bed, waking for just long enough to force himself to eat a little something and take another half-dose of Dreamless Sleep. He’d tried to lose himself in

his potions experiments, but he couldn't concentrate and after he'd nearly sliced off his fingertip while dicing bat spleen, he'd decided that unconsciousness was really his best option at this point.

Thursday morning dawned bright and blue, and Draco dragged himself out of bed and showered and dressed before he called off sick for the second day in his career, then traveled by Floo to the Manor. He knew his mother would be worried about him, and he thought an hour or two should be enough to set her mind at ease. Then he'd go home and pass out for the rest of the day.

Narcissa looked up eagerly when he strode into the dining room where his parents were just sitting down to breakfast. His mother looked up when he walked in.

"Draco," she said.

"Mum," he answered on a sigh. He dropped into his chair and murmured a distracted thank you to the house elf who popped in at his elbow with a cup of tea. He took a grateful sip, found it perfectly hot, and hated himself for missing Harry.

Breakfast was a surprisingly quiet affair. Draco would have thought that Lucius would hold very strong opinions on the fact that his only son and heir was gay, but surprisingly he never mentioned it. Narcissa broke the silence occasionally, asking Draco to pass her this or that, or to comment on how nicely the gardens were blooming.

After the house elves cleared away the dishes, Draco stood to leave. As he passed by his father's chair, Lucius caught his hand.

"Draco," he said, his blue eyes solemn, and Draco steeled himself for what might come next. He was surprised when Lucius told him, "It may not seem like it now, but you will be fine. Everything will be all right again." Lucius's fingers curled, warm and strong, around Draco's for a moment, then let him go.

And Draco was sure that Narcissa had put him up to it, and a quick glance at her confirmed his suspicions, but he appreciated Lucius reaching out to him nonetheless. "Thank you," he said quietly.

He went back home, and felt well enough to spend the afternoon tweaking his Hangover Potion. And even though he still wasn't able to get it working the way he wanted, he left his basement potions lab feeling like he'd accomplished something important.

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Draco didn't show up for work on Wednesday, and Harry spent all of it, aside from the brief foray to Mrs. Dodson's, staring at Draco's empty desk and trying not to worry. After work, Harry tried to go see him again, but he'd been locked out of the Floo. He tried to Apparate to

Draco's doorstep, but he encountered wards that wouldn't even allow him on the same block. Using every scrap of knowledge he'd learned at the cabin, Harry cast a wide array of sensing and detection charms and worked out exactly how to bring down the wards. But Draco obviously didn't want to see him, and in the end Harry left the wards intact and went home alone.

He'd hoped that maybe Draco would be at work the next day, but no such luck. And when Draco called off again, Kingsley called Harry into his office and demanded to know if something had happened.

"He's never missed a day of work in the six years he's been an Auror," he said. "And now he's called off two days in a row. What's going on?"

Harry nearly told Kingsley all of it, but hesitated. He'd have thought that Draco would have gone running to Kingsley the moment he found out about the investigation, but he hadn't. That meant that Kingsley didn't know about their relationship, and that meant that all of the evidence Harry had collected so far still stood.

"I don't know, Sir," he said.

Kingsley watched him shrewdly for a moment. "You don't look so well yourself, Harry."

Harry gave a halfhearted smile. "Must be something going around."

****

The call came on Friday afternoon. Draco had taken another day off, but they contacted him anyway. Another safe house had been discovered, and the Aurors had reason to believe that it was being used as a base of operations for the people brewing Verve and that there was valuable and time-sensitive evidence inside. So Draco had dressed and Apparated to the coordinates they sent him.

Potter was there. Of course he was there, and Draco hated the way his heart hammered when he caught sight of how Potter's face lit up in a hopeful smile when he arrived. Draco ignored him and stalked up to Williams, the Auror in charge of the Verve case.

"What have we got?" he asked.

Williams filled him in on the particulars and laid out the plan: Draco was to dismantle the wards and curses on the door, then lead the way inside. Of course they wanted him to lead the way in, he thought bitterly. Better he set off something nasty than one of them. He stepped just past the gate and shook his wand free of his sleeve, then threw himself into disabling the layers of spells surrounding the property. The wards fell easily a few minutes later, and Draco started up the front walk.

“Hey,” Harry said from beside him and touched him gently on the elbow. He’d followed Draco halfway up the front walk without being told it was safe to do so, the utter *imbecile*, had he learned *nothing* from their safe house work?

“Not now, Potter,” he snapped and jerked his arm away. “Go back outside.”

“Then when?” Harry insisted, and kept following Draco.

“Never,” he spat. “I never want to—“

“Please,” Harry said as he followed Draco across the porch. “Draco, I need—“

“I need you to leave me alone,” Draco told him. “If you haven’t noticed, I’m trying to work. Go away.”

For a moment, Potter watched him with a small, speculative frown. “You’re angry with me,” he said at last in what was possibly the biggest understatement he’d ever heard, and Draco nearly hexed him.

“No, Potter, I am fucking furious with you,” he snarled. “I am so far beyond anger that… what?”

Potter had broken into a relieved smile, which confused Draco entirely. “Oh thank god,” he said. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to hear that you’re angry with me.” Then he took a step back and didn’t say anything else.

Arguing with him just wasn’t worth it. Draco had work to do. “I will never understand you,” he muttered, and turned to focus his attention on the door.

As with the Lestrange estate, the curses were layered so thick on the door that it would take hours to sort them out. Draco hesitated for a moment, then rattled off the spell to light up the safe path and let him in. The door swung open and belatedly it struck Draco… The spells were *exactly the same*, and they’d never caught who was behind the Fiendfyre incident. And that meant that this was another trap for Harry.

He turned quickly to face Harry, blocking the way. “You’re not coming in.”

Potter’s face folded into that mulish expression Draco knew all too well. “You can’t stop me.”

“I shouldn’t have to stop you, Potter, if you had a brain in that thick head of yours you’d be turning around and walking away yourself. These spells are the same ones that were set on the door at the Lestrange estate. And do you recall what happened last time?” he demanded. “We both nearly died, and I wasn’t the target. I can’t let you go in there.”

“Well I’m not letting you go in there alone,” Harry said, folding his arms over his chest. “And you can’t keep me out.”

“Potter, I know you’re under the impression that you can’t die, but one of these days it’s actually going to take,” Draco told him. “And I know that you apparently can’t help being a

giant fucking idiot but for the love of Merlin, will you just stay the fuck outside?"

Harry didn't back down. "And what do you think will happen if you go in there alone? That whatever trap is in there will just say, 'Oh sorry, Draco, don't mind me, I'll just wait for Harry.' I'm not letting you go in by yourself." He glanced up at the house. "Besides, we're expecting a trap, right? So we know what to watch out for."

"Yes, we know to watch out for *someone actively trying to kill you*. Now go the fuck outside," Draco snapped at him.

Harry studied him, his green eyes solemn. "You're worried about me."

Draco glared at him. Merlin, all he wanted was to be back home where he could dose himself with another vial of Dreamless Sleep and not have to deal with any of this shit. "Fine. You want to come with me? Fine," he snapped, heedless that the other Aurors had now come within earshot. "I'm not going to waste any more time arguing with you. If you go in there, you're dead."

He turned on his heel and cast an array of detection charms into the entryway. Nothing lit up, and Draco frowned. He recast them and still nothing made itself known.

"What is it?" Harry asked from beside him.

"Suspicious," Draco said. "I can't find any traps."

He stepped aside to let Harry cast his own detection spells and still nothing came up. Draco's frown deepened. There was one more spell he could try, and he waved his wand and cast. This was a general spell to locate the presence dark magic over a large area, and the only thing it revealed was one small spark of magic down in the basement.

"Draco," Harry said, and abruptly Draco remembered that Harry was *Potter* again and that he hated him.

"Fuck yourself," he spat and strode into the house, putting Harry from his mind and turning his attention to the job at hand.

If this place was meant to look like black-market potions brewers were using this as a hiding place, the trap would likely be set upstairs, where the imaginary perpetrators would have plenty of warning if someone came in while they were in residence. That explained the absence of dark magic as well, when he thought about it. If it was supposed to look like someone was coming here with any regularity, they'd have made it safe. The one spell left down in the basement was likely a remnant, left behind in a place that wasn't used.

"Draco, wait," Potter said, hurrying after him.

Draco ignored him, cast a detection charm on the staircase just to be safe, and started up it.

"Draco," Potter called again.

This was neither the time nor the place, and Draco really had no intention of talking to Potter again if he could help it. He ignored the plea in Potter's voice and the footsteps pounding up the stairs behind him, but he couldn't ignore the sudden sharp crack that echoed through the room.

Draco turned just in time to see Harry freeze as another crack sounded from beneath him, then his mouth turned into a perfect O of surprise as the stairs collapsed beneath him. He didn't make a sound, didn't shout or cry out as he fell, just desperately reached a hand out to Draco.

"Harry!" Draco screamed as he threw himself forward, his own hand reaching back.

Their fingertips brushed, and then Harry was gone, plummeting down into the dark depths of the basement below in a mass of splintering wood and billowing dust. Draco didn't hesitate.

"Lumos!" he cried, illuminating the wreckage below, and he jumped.

His hasty Cushioning Charm protected him from serious injury but didn't stop him from twisting his ankle as he landed. He hobbled over the wreckage to where Harry lay, silent and still.

"Oh Merlin," he gasped as he dropped down beside him. "Please don't be dead, please. Oh Merlin, fuck. Harry."

His hands hovered uselessly. There was so much blood that Draco didn't know where he should try to staunch it from first. Harry was bleeding from his head, from a gash across his chest, from where a shard of wood punctured his thigh, from where the shockingly white bone of his forearm had punched through the skin when it broke. His right leg was twisted at an unnatural angle beneath him, his breath came faint and bubbling, and Draco no idea what the fuck he should do.

And then the Body-Bind hit him and he could do nothing at all.

Chapter 15

Harry opened his eyes to an unfamiliar white ceiling. His whole body ached faintly and his head felt thick and muzzy. He sat up a bit and caught sight of the steady glow of monitoring charms set just beside his bed. Ah, St. Mungo's, then.

It all came back to him in a rush: the stairs, the sharp crack from beneath his feet, Draco's terrified face as he reached one hand for Harry's, and then the sick thrill of falling. He didn't remember any pain, though it must have hurt. The back of his head ached a little more than the rest of him so it was likely he'd cracked his skull on something and passed out, thank god for small mercies.

Harry settled back against the pillows and tried to relax. He'd ended up here often enough to know that the charms at his bedside would have alerted the Mediwitch on duty that he was awake, and someone should be along shortly to check on him, and then he could find out what was going on. Light blue walls meant he was on the ground floor, probably in their Mundane Trauma ward. That was good, at least, that it wasn't pale yellow walls. That would mean the fourth floor which meant Spell Damage, so whoever had set that trap for him hadn't left anything more nasty at the bottom than the hard floor itself. Harry sighed. He really should have listened to Draco and just waited outside.

He wondered if Draco was waiting for him in outside in the waiting room, and pictured him driving the Mediwitches on duty at the floor's main desk half-mad with his sharp words and bouts of frantic pacing. He pictured the sheer terror on Draco's face as the floor dropped away, and how Draco had flung himself forward, arm outstretched, without even a second's hesitation or any thought for his own safety. And Harry understood, because he'd have done the same if it had been Draco falling.

He really shouldn't have pushed at Draco so hard at the house, but after three days of no communication he'd been so desperate. Draco had locked down his Floo and set his wards to keep Harry out. He'd even tried to write, but all of his owls had returned with their letters unopened. Then when he'd seen Draco again, he'd panicked a little, thinking that it might be the only chance he got to set things right. And so he'd insisted on staying at Draco's side, and even Draco's sharp words were welcome. And then when Draco had said how furious he was, Harry had let himself get carried away on a wave of relief. That was the reaction he'd expected from Draco in the first place, and Harry had thirteen years of experience in dealing with an irate Malfoy. For the first time he was completely sure they'd get past it, even if he had to sort through a thousand boxes of Bertie Bott's Beans to do it.

His thoughts scattered as the door opened and a young Mediwitch hurried in. "Hello, Mr. Potter," she said.

"Hello," he said back with a smile. "Can you tell me if I've got any visitors waiting?"

She nodded. "Yes, one. Shall I send him in after your check-up?"

“Please,” he said and settled back against his pillows, and held still while she poked and prodded and asked whether this or that hurt.

“You seem to be doing quite well,” she said when she finished her examination and flipped through his chart to jot down a few notes. “They’ll likely want to keep you overnight; they had to mend some bones so you’ll be a little fragile for the next six to eight hours. I’m sure your Healer will discuss it more in depth with you when he stops by on his rounds.” She made a few more notes in his chart and tucked it under her arm. “I’ll just go get your visitor.”

“Thank you,” Harry said.

He waited anxiously, his heart thudding when he heard footsteps approaching his room and then someone turned the knob of his door.

“Oh,” he said, sagging back against his pillows when Ron walked in. “It’s just you.”

“Who were you expecting, the Queen?” Ron shot back as he folded his lanky body into the chair at Harry’s bedside. “You could look a little glad to see me, you know. I’ve been waiting out there for ages.”

Harry sighed. “I thought maybe Draco was here, but I guess he’s still angry with me.”

“Oh,” Ron said and shifted in his seat. “You don’t know.”

Harry frowned at him, a curl of unease worming through his belly. “Know what?”

“About Draco.”

Cold dread seeped through every inch of him, and he barely repressed shuddering as a shiver swept up his spine. “What about Draco?” Abruptly, Harry remembered Draco throwing himself toward Harry as he fell. Oh god, had he fallen too? “Is he all right? He’s not here as a patient, is he?” Fuck, if Draco had gotten hurt because of him…

“No, no. He’s not here. He’s fine,” Ron said quickly. “It’s just…”

“Ron,” Harry said, and was briefly proud of how calm and even his voice sounded. “Where is he?”

***

They’d arrested him right away, of course. How could they not when a full dozen witnesses placed him arguing with the Savior just minutes before he plummeted nearly two stories to a hard concrete floor? Especially when said Savior had plummeted straight through a floor that Draco himself had walked over without harm just seconds earlier.

Draco had expected that, and for once he couldn’t blame them for not looking any further than the Mark on his arm.

No, what really infuriated him was that they wouldn’t tell him anything about Harry. Personally, Draco thought he had a right to know whether he was being held on suspicion of

attempted murder or actual murder, but the men assigned to guard him apparently didn't agree.

There was a long list of other things currently irritating him, but that was the worst. He could handle anything else if they'd only tell him whether Harry was still alive. Harry might be dead, and Draco didn't know how much longer he could stand to have that fear eating away at him. It was a constant, tingling pressure at the back of his mind. Harry might be dead, and the very last thing Draco said to him was "Fuck yourself." Guilt gnawed at his ribs. He'd just been so *angry*, and yes, he had every right to be angry with Harry his boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend. Whatever he was. But that was no excuse for him to have let Harry his Auror partner put himself in harm's way just because he was a stupid twat that fancied himself immortal. Fucking hell, if Harry was dead…

Draco sighed and tried to stop thinking about it. He leaned back against the cool stone wall and suppressed a shiver. They'd taken his clothes and forced him to dress in a thin cotton undershirt and plain trousers. Standard protocol for prisoners. There was a robe that went with it, but they hadn't given it to him, and Draco refused to give them both the satisfaction of him having to ask for it and the chance for them to deny him. Draco made sure to keep his scarred left arm folded firmly over his belly. He didn't want them to see it. It was bad enough that they'd seen the tattoo on his right arm.

"What's that, Malfoy, one Mark not enough for you?" one of his MLEP escorts had taunted as the other shifted uncomfortably but didn't speak up, and Draco nearly bit through his tongue with the effort of not replying.

Draco sighed again and let his head drop back against the wall. They'd tossed him into one of the Ministry's holding cells, which Draco knew enough to realize was a bad sign. He was more than glad they hadn't thrown him in Azkaban, of course, but it really only meant that he'd be going to trial soon. No sense in rowing him all the way out there just to turn around and haul him back.

He really wished he knew what he'd be on trial for. The image of Harry lying on a heap of twisted and splintered wood, broken and bloody and far too still, danced through his mind and Draco squeezed his eyes shut. Harry couldn't be dead. Someone would have told him if he were dead.

A door banged open from the far end of the corridor, and footsteps approached. Draco sat up when they stopped outside his cell. A key turned in the lock, and the door swung open.

"Ten minutes," someone said, and then Weasley stepped inside.

Draco leapt to his feet, fear knotting his throat. All he could get out was a desperate, "Harry?"

"Harry's fine," Weasley said quickly. "They let him out of the hospital this morning. He's perfectly fine."

Draco felt himself sag beneath the sheer weight of the relief he felt. "Oh thank Merlin."

Weasley gave him a moment to recover his composure a bit and cast a Muffliato around them. When Draco stood up straighter, he said, “You’re really in it now, aren’t you?”

“You don’t honestly think I tried to kill him, do you?” Draco scowled at him. Of course Weasley didn’t; he wouldn’t have come down here if he did. Whatever point he was trying to make, Draco hoped he’d come around to it quickly.

“I don’t know,” Weasley said, his voice annoyingly calm, and folded his arms across his chest. “Did you?”

Draco sneered at him. “Frankly, I’m not that stupid. The Dark Lord already proved that trying to kill Harry bloody Potter is an exercise in futility.”

“It certainly looks like you did,” Weasley said with a shrug. “We have nine witnesses who place you having a heated argument with him just before the incident. How do you think that looks?”

Draco huffed out a breath. “All couples fight, Weasley, and I assure you that I had a hell of a good reason to be angry with him.” He glared for a moment. “And that’s circumstantial at best.”

“Are you a couple?” Weasley asked. “Harry’s under the impression that you broke up with him.”

Draco said nothing. He hadn’t formally ended things with Harry, but he’d certainly had every intention of never seeing him again. Now, after coming so close to losing him, Draco really wasn’t sure what he wanted.

“And what about the threat?” Weasley continued. “We’ve got five of those witnesses who overheard you saying, and I quote, ‘You go in there, you’re dead.’ I think that’s got a bit more weight to it, don’t you?”

“That wasn’t a threat, it was a warning,” Draco growled. “The whole situation was off, just like the call that came in for the Lestrange estate. Same curse patterns on the front door. I was telling him that he shouldn’t go in there for his own safety.”

“And you didn’t try harder if you thought his life was in danger?”

Draco flung his hands in the air. “Have you ever tried to convince that stubborn arsehole to do something when he didn’t want to?” he snapped. “Fucking hell, arguing with him is like trying to squeeze tears from a turnip: impossible, pointless, and at the end of it the only one who feels like crying is me!”

Weasley took a half-step back, startled by Draco’s outburst, and Draco folded his arms back across himself as he took several deep, calming breaths. Harry was fine. Everything would be fine.

“Look, I know I fucked up. The fact that he got hurt is my fault,” he continued, calmer now. “I accept full responsibility. He was irritating the piss out of me. I was not thinking clearly,

and I was distracted, and Harry could have died because of it. But I did *not* try to kill him."

Weasley nodded. "I believe you. And so does Harry. You're not a killer, Malfoy."

Draco felt his temper flare again. He gritted his teeth against another outburst. "Lovely. Potter thinks I'm not a murderer. It'd have been wonderful if he'd come to that conclusion without leading me on."

"Malfoy," Weasley said gently. "Harry never thought you were guilty, right from the beginning."

It hit Draco like a slap across the face. "You knew!"

"I did."

And Weasley said it so calm and unrepentant that Draco wanted to punch him right in his stupid freckled face. "You knew!" he said again. "And you didn't tell me? You didn't think to yourself, 'oh, Draco's boyfriend is investigating him for murder, maybe he ought to know about that!' Fucking hell, Weasley, I thought we were…" He trailed off because he didn't know what he and Weasley were. Certainly not friends, but more than acquaintances.

"It wasn't my place to tell you," Weasley said, and he still sounded infuriatingly calm. "It was something you needed to hear from Harry."

"Well I didn't hear it from Harry, did I?" he shot back. "I had to find out from… When I…" Draco trailed off as the pieces settled into place. Harry's agitation on Tuesday, the desperate, frantic way they'd shagged that evening, the blowjob in the shower after. How Harry said they'd talk after dinner. "He was going to tell me."

"He should have told you right away, but he said he'd made plans for your birthday," Weasley said, and sighed. "Really, he shouldn't have started this thing with you at all. And frankly I'm surprised you went along with it. Harry's impulse control has always been shaky at best, but I really would have thought you had more sense than that."

Draco ignored him. "He was going to tell me," he said again. If Harry had been planning to confess everything, it meant that he felt guilty. And that meant… "It was real," Draco breathed. He felt dizzy, the sheer rush of pure relief so strong it made him feel a little sick. "He really does love me."

"You're as much of an idiot as he is, Malfoy. Of course he does," Weasley sighed. "You know what it was like for him growing up. Love is a big deal for him. He'd never say it if he didn't mean it." Weasley eyed him for a moment. "You haven't told anyone in the department about your relationship, have you?"

Draco shook his head. "No, no one."

"Good," Weasley said. "Don't. Right now, the search Harry did on your home stands. If you say anything, it'll get tossed out."

“I’m not stupid,” Draco spat. But even as angry with Harry as he still was, he couldn’t help but feel grateful that he’d been spared a legion of Aurors descending on his home and tearing apart every inch of it. He had a small collection of rare and not-quite-legal potions ingredients hidden away in his basement lab that he didn’t recall Harry mentioning in his reports. Harry obviously hadn’t done a very thorough search, but other Aurors wouldn’t be so negligent, and Draco sure as hell didn’t need anything else stacked against him right now.

Weasley shrugged. “How many rules did you break by taking up with Harry?” he asked, like Draco really needed reminding of *that* right now.

Draco opened his mouth, and the door swung open. “Time’s up,” the guard in the hall called, and Weasley ended the Muffliato.

“It hasn’t been ten minutes,” Draco snapped.

“It has been if I say it’s been. Come on, Weasley.”

Weasley turned to go, and Draco caught at his sleeve. “Give him a message for me. Tell him…” He thought fast, mentally groping for a short phrase that Harry would understand everything Draco wanted to tell him, but that the Patrolman currently glaring at him wouldn’t get. “Tell him I don’t regret my tattoo.”

Weasley paused in the doorway. “Really?” he said as the Patrolman muttered about Death Eater scum. “That’s really what you want me to tell him?”

“Yes,” Draco said. “He’ll know what I mean. Tell him.”

“Weasley, come on!”

Weasley nodded one last time to Draco and left. As the lock turned over, sealing him in, Draco sighed and sat back down on his bench. Suddenly, his dim little cell seemed so much brighter. Harry was alive. And Harry loved him. Draco was still fucking furious with him for lying, of course, but for the moment that anger was buried beneath the sheer weight of relief.

Draco smiled to himself and let out a long, slow exhale. Everything was going to be fine. Harry loved him, and when Harry loved someone, he didn’t let anything happen to them. Harry would take care of him, because he was Harry Potter and that’s just what he did.

He let himself relax for the first time since they’d tossed him into this little holding cell. For the first time, Draco knew that everything would be okay.

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Harry was so wrapped up in shouting at the poor, cowering witch manning the desk that he barely noticed the door opening. A distant, rational corner of his brain knew that he shouldn’t be taking his irritation out on her. She was just the receptionist in charge of making sure

people going down to the holding cells signed in or out, and only following orders she'd been given, but *fuck* he was frustrated. Harry had been on edge since at the hospital when Ron had told him that Draco had been arrested, and it turned his stomach every time he thought of Draco sitting alone in a cramped and dim holding cell, probably scared as hell and trying his damnedest not to show it. Then Harry had come in here and been told that he wasn't allowed to see Draco, and his self-control had grown frighteningly thin.

Draco was being held on suspicion of attempted murder of one Harry Potter, and so it was for Harry's own safety that he wasn't allowed down, the receptionist had said when he'd tried to talk her into bending the rules just this once, just for him. And the last frayed thread of his composure snapped, and so did he. Harry never tried to use his name to get things, and the one fucking time he tried, it didn't even do any good.

The thought that Draco would hurt him was in and of itself ridiculous. The fact that Draco could hurt him while unarmed and locked in a cell and guarded by armed and trained Patrolmen was even moreso, a fact which Harry was currently letting the receptionist – and probably everyone else on this floor of the Ministry – know at the top of his voice.

"Harry, mate, you need to calm down. You're going to put yourself back in the hospital if you keep that up," Ron interrupted.

Harry turned on him, the receptionist already forgotten. "You saw him? How is he?"

Ron slid a comforting arm over his shoulders and tried to steer him away. "Why don't we go sit down and I'll tell you about it?"

That was tempting. Harry's leg ached something fierce. It had been broken in three places, the Healers said, and they'd wanted to keep him until the afternoon. But Harry had insisted on being released and they'd given in, after forcing him to promise he'd spend the day resting. So far he'd done no such thing. He'd come straight here, intent on seeing Draco as soon as he could.

Harry pulled away from Ron. "I don't need to sit down," he said stubbornly, and his leg throbbed in disagreement. "What I need is for *her* to let me down to the holding cells." He flung a hand in the receptionist's direction and she flinched. "I need—"

"You need to sit down," Ron repeated. "Come on, and I'll tell you what he said. He gave me a message for you."

That brought Harry up short. "He did? What'd he say?"

Ron just shook his head. "Come sit down and I'll tell you."

For a moment, Harry considered arguing. But Ron just watched him with that stubborn set to his chin that meant he wouldn't be giving in any time soon, and despite all her cowering and flinching, the receptionist didn't seem like she was anywhere near breaking either. And Harry really did want to hear what Draco had to say. But in the end, it was a sharp twinge of pain that leapt from his knee to his hip that ultimately convinced him.

“Fine,” he sighed, and couldn’t resist aiming one last glower at the receptionist.

He waited a moment while Ron signed back out, then they headed up to Harry’s office. Ron eased the door shut behind them as Harry hobbled over to the sofa. Ron started to sit beside him, then hesitated and pulled a face, and Harry knew that Ron was remembering certain events that had taken place on that sofa. He perched on the edge of Draco’s desk, and Harry shifted, angling himself sharply to one side to be able to put his aching leg up, and refused to be embarrassed about the whole shagging-on-the-sofa incident.

“Well?” he said. “What did Draco say?”

Ron shifted slightly, crossing one ankle over the other and folding his arms across his chest. “He said he doesn’t regret getting his Mark.” He frowned. “Does that mean anything to you?”

Harry shook his head, utterly baffled. “No, that can’t be right. He—“ Harry cut himself off before he told Ron that Draco had tried to burn it off. Of course he regretted it, by why would he tell Ron that he didn’t? “He really said that?”

“Yeah. ‘Tell him I don’t regret my tattoo,’ just like that.”

For a moment, things didn’t seem any clearer, but then it sank in and Harry laughed aloud. “Not his Mark, Ron, his tattoo! He doesn’t love me!”

Ron stared at him like he’d lost his mind. “He… doesn’t love you?”

“Not yet,” Harry said, still grinning so fiercely his cheeks ached. “That’s what he was telling me. He doesn’t love me yet, but he’s giving me a chance. He doesn’t regret *us*. He still wants to try.” He felt giddy and shaky with relief. Draco still wanted him. Harry knew it was probably just that he’d come so close to dying that had pushed Draco to give him that chance, but fuck, Harry would take it gladly.

“I hate to burst your bubble, mate, but you really shouldn’t be planning the honeymoon just yet. He’s still arrested on suspicion of your murder.”

Harry waved a hand. “But he hasn’t told anyone about our relationship. That means that when they try him, I’m still able to speak on his behalf. I don’t think that a case of attempted murder will hold up to the ‘victim’ speaking up on the accused’s behalf. Do you know when they’ve scheduled it for?”

Ron shook his head. “No, but it’s probably soon.” He slid off the desk. “You should get to work planning out what you’re going to say, if you plan on speaking for him. I’m going to go find out when it is.”

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On Monday morning, the door to Draco’s cell swung open.

“Come on, Malfoy,” Weasley said. “Your trial’s in an hour.”

Draco stood. They certainly hadn’t wasted any time setting it up, had they? “Is it an Inquiry or am I going before the Wizengamot?” he asked as he stepped out into the hall.

The Patrolman guarding him gave him a darkly suspicious look, and Draco sneered at him in return. Weasley took him by the elbow and hurried him away before anything could come of it.

“Come on, I’ve managed to talk them into letting you shower,” Weasley said and gave a little sigh. “The papers have caught wind of what’s happened. Harry tried to push for an Inquiry, get it all taken care of quietly. But once it got out…”

Draco sighed too. “Even the great Harry Potter himself couldn’t fix it.”

“Right.”

They walked in silence to the showers where another two Aurors stood, apparently waiting for them. It took a few minutes for Weasley to convince them to wait outside, but eventually they agreed, then Draco stepped inside with Weasley on his heels.

Draco headed straight for the nearest shower stall and twisted the knobs to full before he began stripping off his clothes. Weasley turned away to give him a little privacy, which he appreciated, despite the fact that Weasley had already seen him in flagrante delicto. Draco stepped under the spray as soon as it warmed and heaved a great sigh of pleasure. The Patrolman who brought him his dinner every night was kind enough to do a few cleaning charms on him, but it was really no substitute for a proper shower.

Draco soaped himself up, rinsed quickly, and turned off the shower. He grabbed the towel set aside for him and wrapped it around his waist.

“Did you bring me anything to wear?” he asked. He really didn’t want to face the Wizengamot in his prison robes.

“Yeah,” Weasley said, and handed Draco a stack of neatly-folded clothing.

Draco recognized the outfit that he’d left behind at Harry’s last week when he’d gone running out. It had been laundered and neatly pressed, and he smiled. Harry even included his pocket watch and, he discovered when he checked the pocket of his waistcoat, his glasses. He looked up to find that Weasley couldn’t seem to figure out if he wanted to stare at Draco’s tattoos or Draco’s scars. When he saw Draco watching him, he flushed and looked away, glanced back and opened his mouth, then shut it and looked away again.

“You can ask,” Draco said mildly as he rifled through the stack of clothing in search of underpants.

“I was just wondering which was the one you don’t regret,” Weasley said.

Draco paused in his search. “This one,” he said, holding out his right arm. “I got it for him.”

“I gave him your message, and he wanted me to tell you that he understands,” Weasley said. “He wanted to come see you, you know. But they wouldn’t let him.”

“Of course they wouldn’t. They think I tried to kill him,” Draco muttered, and went back to sorting through the stack of clothing. He found the underpants folded away inside the trousers and for a moment he could only stare. “Oh dear Merlin. That stupid arse.” He held up the underpants, light blue with little fluttering snitches. “I knew I should have burned these bloody things when I had the chance.”

Weasley’s mouth quirked up in a faint smile. “I told him you’d be arsed off if he sent you those.”

“Clearly he didn’t listen,” Draco muttered. He dropped his towel and pulled on the stupid snitch briefs. Merlin, he’d absolutely better not lose his trial now. He couldn’t imagine them shipping him off to Azkaban, confiscating all his personal belongings, and then finding these stupid underpants among them. “They don’t even match,” he grumbled.

He finished dressing, vaguely wondering what Harry had done with the underpants Draco had left at his house. He rifled through his pockets. Glasses, keys, pocket watch, handkerchief, and yes. His fingers closed around a small piece of metal. Bottle cap.

“You seem calm,” Weasley commented.

“I am calm,” Draco said, even though his stomach roiled at the thought of going before the Wizengamot. “I’m innocent. I’ll go in there, request to be questioned under Veritaserum, and that’ll be that.”

Weasley sucked in a slow breath through his teeth. “Veritaserum?” he repeated. “Malfoy, the place is going to be crawling with reporters. And most of your Interrogators hate you. They’ll leap at this chance to—“

“I don’t fucking care what they do. As long as they ask me ‘Did you try to murder Harry Potter?’ and I can tell them once and for all that I *didn’t*, I don’t care about the rest.”

It’d be horrible. Every word he said would be splashed across the papers. His mother would get that awful pinched look on her face again, and Draco didn’t even want to think about the lectures he’d get from Lucius. But needs must. In the bigger picture, this was the right course of action.

Weasley sighed. “If you’re sure.”

“Who are my Interrogators?” Draco asked. Not that it’d make a difference, if they hated him. But certain members of the Wizengamot would respond better to him acting quiet and meek, while others would respect him for sitting up straight and speaking with calm and careful deference. He’d be anything they wanted him to be, as long as they let him go home to Harry at the end of it. He’d spent a lot of time in his cell thinking, and the only thing he knew was that he missed Harry so much he almost ached with the desire to touch him again. Draco was still infuriated about being deceived, but he was willing to try to work past it. He’d at least

give Harry a chance to explain what in seven hells he'd been thinking. And some groveling would probably be nice.

"Cartwright, Chambers, Doge, Zimmermann and…" Weasley trailed off, and seemed to steel himself before admitting the last name. "Shacklebolt."

For a moment, the name hit Draco like a Bludger to the chest. Years he'd put in, *years* doing whatever shit jobs they asked of him, and still it didn't make a difference. It hadn't changed anything. He inhaled sharply and let it out again. But of course Shacklebolt would be one of his interrogators. Shacklebolt thought he was guilty, of course he'd want to be one of the ones to send Draco away to Azkaban. The Aurors were his responsibility and if he thought there was a snake in their midst he'd want to cast it out himself. Draco took a deep breath and shrugged off the pain.

Draco nodded to Weasley. "We should go. It wouldn't do to be late to my own trial, would it?" He forced a smile, and Weasley smiled back. Draco appreciated that, even though it did look a bit sickly. He hoped his own smile looked better than that.

They left the showers and the two Aurors outside the door fell into step around them, one leading, the other bringing up the rear. The trip down to the courtroom was long, but Draco didn't mind. He took the time to center himself, using all the tricks he'd learned with Occlumency. He took all his fear, his nervousness, his hurt at being accused, and all of his feelings for Harry and packed them away in the corner of his mind. No matter what happened, he needed to appear in control. With his Interrogators, he couldn't show any weakness. He'd be calm, and respectful, and carefully composed.

All too soon, he found himself standing in front of the broad double doors leading to the courtroom, and Draco felt a flash of déjà vu. He remembered his first trial, standing outside these very doors with his parents. His terror when he walked in, past row after row of unfriendly faces. The sick fear sloshing through his belly as the prosecutor read off their charges, and how it'd bubbled into giddy relief when he'd been cleared of all wrongdoing on account of his age, his mother's charges had been dropped because she'd saved Harry's life, and his father had been given nothing worse than a hefty fine and five years' house arrest.

He should be so lucky this time.

"Ready?" Weasley murmured to him, and when Draco nodded he grasped the iron handles of the door and shoved it open. Draco swept down the center aisle, half a step ahead of his Auror escorts. He caught sight of his parents near the back of the room, pale hair above paler faces, and he spared a quick nod for his mum. He spotted Granger near the front, and next to her sat Harry. Draco let his shoulders relax a fraction. Harry was here. Granger met his eyes as he passed, but Harry continued to stare straight ahead, his expression calm and unconcerned.

Draco took his seat on the hard chair at the front of the room, the pair of Aurors who had escorted him lingering just behind him, one on either side, while Weasley slipped into the seat Granger had saved for him. Draco focused on his breathing and calming his nerves while the trial's participants were introduced for the benefit of the court scribe. He let out a sigh of relief when Chambers, a stern-looking elderly witch was named his prosecutor. He vaguely

recalled Cartwright being one of the people Lucius had stepped on years ago in his climb to power, a fact confirmed by the sour sneer on Cartwright's face. Draco drew himself up a little straighter but trained his eyes on the floor as they read off his charge: attempted murder of Harry Potter.

A shiver of fear slipped past his mental walls. Draco pushed it away.

"Before the proceedings begin, the accused would like to put forth for consideration his request to be questioned under Veritaserum," he spoke up, and a muffled rush of surprised whispers rippled through the assembled crowd. While answering under Veritaserum wouldn't be enough to automatically prove his innocence, he hoped it would lend his testimony a credibility that'd have the Wizengamot actually listening to him, not judging him guilty before he'd even spoken a word.

"The accused's request is denied," Chambers said flatly.

"On what grounds?" Draco asked, shocked. He'd have thought they'd leap at the chance to get him under Veritaserum. At least they should have debated his request amongst themselves and then voted on it. He hadn't even entertained the possibility they'd reject it straight off.

"It is not your place to question us," Cartwright snapped, and a flush crept up his cheeks as Chambers raised a hand in his direction to quiet him.

"We have fully reviewed the evidence presented to us by Head Auror Shacklebolt. Among it were several pages detailing your potions experiments, including an antidote for Veritaserum."

"But I haven't got it working," Draco protested.

"Forgive us if we do not take your word for it," Chambers said, looking down her nose at him. "Now, if you've nothing further to add we'll continue with the proceedings."

Draco struggled to draw in a breath, his fingertips digging into the arms of his chair until they hurt. They weren't allowing him to take Veritaserum. He had no way to prove himself other than his word and he knew, looking at the tiers of hardened faces regarding him, they'd never believe him.

"Excuse me," Harry spoke up from behind him. "I'd like to present myself as prime witness for the accused."

A wave of excited murmurs swept through the room, and Draco turned in his seat to see Harry coming up the aisle. He was dressed in unrelieved black from head to toe in a set of tailored robes with a high collar and a long row of tiny silver buttons up the front, and he'd even made an attempt at taming his wild hair. He looked intense and powerful and serious and every inch the Savior. He didn't so much as glance at Draco as he came to a stop beside his chair and stood, watching the Interrogators silently, his mouth pressed into a thin line, his brilliant eyes blazing. And suddenly Draco understood what Harry meant when he talked about the difference between *Draco* and *Malfoy*.

Because this person standing before him was Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One. The bloke who wore t-shirts and jeans and ratty trainers under his Auror robes, and bribed him with Muggle takeaway, and owned a pair of underpants with snitches on them, *that* was Harry. And Harry was under there, in there somewhere underneath the solemn robes and the stern expression and the mantle of power he wore like a second skin, and none of these poor fools in their plum-colored robes would ever get to know him the way Draco did. They'd only see this strong and capable man who'd saved them all. They'd never see him whinging about a hangover or arguing passionately about women's hats or cooking breakfast in nothing but his lover's half-buttoned shirt. And Draco had never wanted him this much. He dug his fingernails harder into the wooden armrests of his chair, certain he was leaving marks, and tried to force the beginnings of the most inappropriately-timed erection he'd ever had in his life to go away through sheer force of will.

"Auror Potter," Shacklebolt began severely. "You cannot be a witness for the accused. You're a witness for the prosecution."

"That's not your decision to make, Kingsley," Harry said evenly, the fire in his eyes never wavering.

"This is highly unusual," Chambers said. "Mr. Malfoy is accused of your attempted murder; to have you speak on his behalf is highly irregular."

"If it's my attempted murder he's accused of, then that should make me the best sort of witness then, shouldn't it? I was there for the whole event," Harry said, his voice calm and reasonable.

Draco came frighteningly close to leaping out of his seat and kissing Harry right then and there in front of everyone. He couldn't believe he'd felt afraid for even a second, because of course Harry would come through for him. He forced his fingers to relax before he got splinters under his fingernails while the Interrogators murmured to each other.

Several minutes ticked by, and Harry shifted his weight from one foot to the other and back again, his only outward show of unease. Draco watched him from the corner of his eye. He didn't trust his face to not betray him if he looked fully at Harry.

"Auror Potter," Chambers said at last, looking down at him from his seat. "We have concerns about your objectivity concerning the accused."

"I'm not objective," Harry told them. "And I don't see why I should be if I mean to speak for him. He's not guilty."

"Pardon me, I phrased that poorly," Chambers said. "What I mean is, we have concerns that you may not be…" She trailed off, and Shacklebolt jumped in.

"Just a couple of months ago, the pair of you could barely stand to be in the same room. Now you're calling him by his first name and inviting him to your home."

Harry's mouth tugged down into a small frown. "You asked me to investigate him."

Kingsley met his gaze evenly. “We are concerned that the accused may have taken steps to alter your perception of him.”

For a moment, Draco’s blood boiled. He didn’t know if it was his superior’s implicit dismissal of him – ‘the accused,’ he’d said, like Draco didn’t even deserve a name anymore – or the accusation that he’d done something to Harry. That he’d risk everything by modifying the Chosen One’s mind, or slipping him some sort of potion, or whatever it was they thought he’d done. That he, that *anyone*, would be capable of forcing Harry to change his mind about something against his will.

From the sudden clench of Harry’s fists, knuckles and tendons and *I must not tell lies* standing out starkly against the back of his hand, Draco thought he might feel similarly.

“I’d know if he’d done something to me,” Harry said, his voice even but tense.

“Would you?” Shacklebolt returned with a perfectly raised eyebrow.

“What do I have to do, swear it under Veritaserum?” Harry snapped at him, the first lapse of his composure.

A dangerous one, Draco found seconds later when Chambers raised her eyebrows at him contemplatively. “Would you be willing to give your testimony under Veritaserum?”

The entire room seemed to hold its breath. Then Harry nodded sharply and said, “I have nothing to hide.”

Draco closed his eyes. He was fucked, utterly fucked. He didn’t think even the Chosen One could resist the effects of Veritaserum, and secrets often had a way of working their way into the harsh light of day.

There was a brief bustle and flurry of movement as a junior member of the Wizengamot was dispatched to retrieve a vial of Veritaserum, and then Harry very carefully administered three drops to himself under their watchful eyes. Draco could only stare helplessly, and wondered how Harry could be hiding his nerves so well.

“I’d like you to lie to me,” Chambers said after waiting a few minutes for it to take effect. “What is your name?”

Harry clearly tried to fight it, his jaw clenched with the effort. He made a half-strangled attempt at what sounded like the letter J, then sighed. “Harry James Potter.”

“And your birthday?”

“July 31, 1980.”

“And what is the nature of your relationship with the accused?”

“We’re partners. Or ex-partners. I’m not really sure, considering the circumstances,” Harry said calmly with a brief glance at Draco, all before Draco even had a chance to panic. And thank *fuck* for double meanings.

“Did the accused try to hurt you?”

“No,” Harry said, his voice ringing loud and clear to the furthest corners of the room, and Draco heard someone gasp, which Draco thought was a bit extreme. He didn’t think they should find it *that* surprising that he didn’t try to kill Harry. “No, he didn’t. He tried to save me. He realized the house was a trap and tried to keep me from going inside, but I didn’t listen. And when the floor collapsed under me, he jumped forward to grab me without a second’s hesitation, heedless of personal risk.” He let his eyes sweep from face to face, Cartwright to Doge to Chambers to Zimmermann to Shacklebolt, where he engaged in a brief staring contest. “He wouldn’t hurt me. And I trust him with my life.”

Hearing Harry state it so plainly felt a little like the first time Harry told Draco he loved him. Thrilling and exciting and still a little bit of a shock. Harry let his eyes dart over to Draco for an instant, and Draco found it hard to keep the impassive expression firmly on his face.

“And how do you explain the fact that he was able to walk directly over the Pitfall Trap with no harm, while you fell through?” Chambers asked

“Because the trap was set to let him pass over it unharmed,” Harry said, and added, “You know that,” with a quick glance at Shacklebolt. “And you know my theory. I’ve looked into the deaths of his previous partners and in all of them, in every single instance, the crime they were investigating was never solved. Someone is trying to frame Draco, and they’re trying to do it by attempting to kill me. It happened with this most recent house, with the Fiendfyre in the Lestrange estate, with the collapsing ceiling at the—“

“It’s a *theory*, Auror Potter, with not one shred of evidence to back it up,” Shacklebolt said.

“But isn’t that what we’re doing here? Presenting theories with no evidence?” Harry countered. “Because I can’t think of one shred of evidence you’ve produced against Auror Malfoy that’s anything but circumstantial. Someone is trying to frame him.”

“The Pitfall Trap is proof enough,” Chambers cut in, regaining control over her proceedings. “The only way to make that staircase safe for the accused to walk over would be with access to his magical signature or his blood.”

Harry shook his head. “He’s being framed,” he repeated stubbornly.

But Draco sucked in a sharp breath, his eyes going wide, his shoulders tense with the urge to turn around and look behind him as Chambers’ words sank in. His *blood*, fucking hell, it always came back to blood. “He’s not trying to frame me,” he said softly before he could stop himself, and promptly bit his tongue. Fuck. Fucking hell.

Frowning, Harry glanced over at him and murmured his name. Draco just shook his head, fingernails digging into the armrests again. Chambers caught their exchange.

“Is there something you’d like to share with the Wizengamot, Mr. Malfoy?” Chambers asked.

Draco shook his head again. There was a small disturbance from somewhere amid the assembled audience behind him, and then a door opened and shut quietly, barely audible over

the murmurs of the audience.

“Draco,” Harry said gently. “What did you mean, he’s not trying to frame you?” He looked squarely at Draco for the first time. “Who do you mean?”

Draco shook his head again, biting the corner of his lip so hard he drew blood as a whole tangle of roiling emotions seethed in his gut. Anger, shock, hatred. Shame and regret and *frustration* that he didn’t add up the fucking clues sooner. Guilt, because their deaths really were on his hands. And a sharp flash of rage with himself, because even now his first knee-jerk instinct was to confess to a crime he didn’t commit, to throw himself onto his own sword to save his father. He couldn’t resist the urge to look any longer, and half-hoping he was wrong, he risked a glance behind him to see Narcissa sitting alone.

“Fuck,” he said. He wanted to kick something. He wanted to scream and rage and above all, he wanted to fucking murder Lucius. The best he could do was stall for time until Lucius had a chance to make a solid head start, because if Draco ever laid eyes on him again…

“Mr. Malfoy,” Chambers said sharply, and when Draco just shook his head for a fourth time, she turned her attention to Harry. “Auror Potter. What did Mr. Malfoy just tell you?”

“He’s not being framed,” Harry ground out, clearly fighting the Veritaserum for the half-truth. “He said he’s not being framed.”

Chambers regarded him sternly. “What did the accused tell you *exactly*?” she asked.

The tension in Harry’s shoulders dropped as he gave in to the Veritaserum. “He said, ‘He’s not trying to frame me.’”

“Who?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “He won’t tell me.”

“Harry,” Draco said. “Please.” He had no idea what he was begging for. Whether it was for Harry to stop asking him, to stop talking, to stop trying to figure it out. Or if it was just for this whole fucking thing to be over. He squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted this to not be his life.

“Draco,” Harry said softly. “If you know who did this, you need to say it. *Please*, you need to tell me so we can get you out of this.” He sighed, a soft huff of frustration, as Draco just clamped his mouth into a firm line. “Draco. Please. Who could you want to protect so badly that you’d risk…” He trailed off.

Draco’s eyes snapped up to his, and he saw that Harry knew. “Please,” he said again, helpless, because now it was over.

“Oh my god,” Harry said, still staring at him. “Why?”

“Auror Potter,” Chambers said. “Do you know who did it?”

“Yes,” Harry said through gritted teeth. “Draco, I’m sorry.”

“Who was it?”

It seemed that the entire room held its breath for a long second, and then Harry said, “Lucius Malfoy.”

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It seemed like every single person in the audience had lost their minds after that, and half the Wizengamot had been frantically banging their gavels by the time order was restored, while Draco sat in his chair, slumped and defeated and visibly stunned. Harry had wanted nothing more than to gather him up in his arms and hold him close, but he didn’t. He absolutely didn’t need to give the papers anything else to latch on to by touching Draco in public. The trial and Lucius’s ensuing flight had given them more than enough to run for the week.

And run with it, they had. It had been splashed across the front page every day this week. Coverage of the trial, photos of a scowling Draco exiting the courtroom, speculation galore, all mixed with just enough fact to give it an air of credibility. Lucius had made his escape, something he’d clearly been planning for a while in case things took a turn for the worse for him. The Aurors had tracked him to France where he’d disappeared without a trace. Personally, Harry didn’t even think he was in Europe anymore. Harry was torn between hoping he’d be caught and thrown in Azkaban for the rest of his miserable life, and hoping, for Draco’s sake, that Lucius disappeared forever.

He’d left chaos in his wake. The Aurors were still rooting out people Lucius had bribed into helping him, clerks he’d pressed for information, Patrolmen he’d paid off to send cases to Draco under false names. And, worst of all, a young witch in the mail room who’d been lacing Kingsley’s personal mail with a potion that heightened suspicions, which Lucius had doctored with a few drops of his blood to heighten Kingsley’s suspicions of Draco in particular. Presumably Lucius had been trying to get Draco fired, and it had nearly backfired on him. The young witch had been recruited through a combination of blackmail and bribery, and Harry thought she was lucky to have *only* been fired after the rage Kingsley had gone into when he found out what had been done to him. Harry had heard through Ministry gossip that Draco had been called into his office shortly thereafter for a very long (and long overdue, in Harry’s opinion) apology, and they’d finally started to assign him cases other than MLEP overflow. For his first, they’d recruited his help in pinpointing all of the ways Lucius had slipped through Ministry security as the Unspeakables worked to tighten all the holes.

Harry wondered how Draco was handling all of this, whether he was surly and snappish, or bearing it all with a brittle stoicism. Harry hadn’t seen him since the trial on Monday, after which Draco had slipped out of the room and, as far as Harry could tell, out of his life. And it was killing Harry, but he refused to follow. Mrs. Dodson was right; if Harry wanted their relationship to work, then Draco needed to be the one in control right now. And that meant that Harry needed to wait until Draco was ready to talk to him again.

So instead Harry had gone straight to Kingsley after the trial and told him about his relationship with Draco, which had earned Harry a brutal reprimand and a fresh-faced young Auror straight out of training who blushed every time he addressed her as his new partner. He didn't see her lasting past the end of the month. Draco had certainly come out ahead as far as partners went. He'd been assigned to Ron, who'd been thrilled to finally get rid of Smith.

Not wanting to seem too desperate, Harry had waited until Thursday to ask about it.

"It's been good, so far," Ron had said. "He's still kind of an ass, but he cleaned my office and he does all the paperwork for me."

"Yeah," Harry replied with a wan smile. "He does that. Just make sure you hang your robes up properly."

Ron pulled a face at that. "I've already got that, mate. I dropped my robes over the back of my chair once and he threw them at my head."

"Yeah," Harry had said again, and something deep in his chest ached fiercely. "He does that too."

Harry sighed and shifted on his bar stool. It was Friday, and Friday was always pub night, even if he didn't particularly feel like drinking. He'd taken off nearly forty minutes early this afternoon, to which his new partner had smiled and blushed and wished him a good weekend, and for a minute Harry hadn't known how to react. Draco would have bitched him out and then probably made him stay a few minutes late just to really make his point, and Harry was vaguely surprised to find that he missed being called to task like that. Or maybe he just missed Draco being around to do it. Harry sighed again and took a sip of his pint to find that it'd grown mostly warm. He'd been nursing the same one since he came in.

The door opened, and he couldn't keep his eyes from darting to it, his heart pounding for a glimpse of bright blond hair. But this time it was an older Auror that Harry didn't recognize. He took another sip of his pint, and the door opened again. Harry brightened when Ron stepped into the pub, but his excitement evaporated when Ron crossed the room alone.

"You look like someone just killed your kneazle," Ron said, waving over the bartender.

"I'm fine," Harry said, forcing a smile. From the flat stare Ron gave him in return, Harry didn't think he had him fooled.

"You're not fine, and thank Merlin I'm not going to have to put up with you tonight. I've already had to deal with Malfoy moping around all week, I can't take it from you too," Ron said with a gusty sigh. "He's waiting for you."

Harry blinked. "Waiting for me?"

"Yeah. At his place. He told me to tell you to go over there," Ron said, then his mouth twitched up in a grin. "Well, I may have encouraged him to talk to you. Or bullied him into it. I think he was a little impressed with my tenacity, but I didn't grow up with five older brothers without learning a thing or two."

“You told him to?” Harry was still trying to take it all in. He hadn’t heard from Draco all week, but now Draco wanted him to come over? And Ron had been the one to talk him into it?

“Yeah. Never say I’m not the best mate you could ever ask for. And all I ask in return is that you never, never, *ever* tell me what happens tonight.” Ron paused and gave a theatrical shudder. “Malfoy mentioned something about returning your pants and I absolutely do not want to *know*.”

Harry broke into a wide grin. “You’re the best mate I could ever ask for,” Harry told him, and then, half-delirious with excitement to be seeing Draco again and thrilled to know that Draco wanted to see him again too, Harry grabbed Ron in a rib-crushing hug and planted a great big smacking kiss right on his cheek. He grinned at Ron, and Ron stared at him like he’d just lost his bloody mind, and then Harry raced outside and Apparated as soon as he cleared the door.

He appeared outside Draco’s end terrace with a soft bang, and his excitement disappeared in a sudden rush of nerves as doubts crowded in. But he was here, and Draco was just inside, and Harry really wanted to see him again. He climbed the steps to the front door and knocked.

Long seconds dragged by and Harry debated whether he should knock again or maybe if he should save himself a lot of stress and Disapparate home instead when he heard footsteps from inside, and a moment later the door swung open and Draco stepped back to allow him in. For a moment Harry was too preoccupied with shutting the door behind himself and toeing his shoes off and quietly panicking to really take in Draco’s appearance.

When he did a few moments later, he couldn’t help cracking a smile. “What are you wearing?”

Draco shrugged and tucked his hands into the pocket of Harry’s red hoodie. “It’s comfortable,” he said defensively. “I rather like these pocket shirts of yours.”

Harry’s smile grew wider. “It’s called a hoodie, Draco.”

“A hoodie? Well that’s ridiculous,” Draco said. “The pocket is *clearly* its best feature.” He turned and led the way into his living room. He sat on the sofa and tucked his bare feet under him, his bent knees straining the soft fabric of Harry’s grey pajama bottoms as Harry settled on the other end. “How have you been?”

“I feel like I should be asking you that,” Harry said, though he really didn’t need to ask. The dark circles under Draco’s eyes and the way his mouth pulled down at the corners told Harry everything he needed to know.

Draco shrugged again. “It’s been an interesting week for me,” he said. “It… hasn’t been easy. They won’t catch him, you know.”

Harry frowned. “How can you know that?”

“Because I know my father,” Draco said. He sighed and seemed to draw in on himself. “My mother’s not handling it terribly well, as you can imagine.”

“And how are you handling it?” Harry asked. He scooted a little closer.

“Not well,” Draco admitted. “I’ve always known my father’s a murderer, and that was hard enough. But it’s harder still knowing that he did it for me. That’s what all that was about, you know. He wanted me to quit my job. He would have killed you to get me to stop being an Auror. That’s what the whole thing was about. When I wouldn’t quit, he was trying to get me fired. And it’s so fucking ridiculous that he…”

Harry reached out and curled his hand around Draco’s knee. “That’s not your fault.”

“I know,” Draco said. “I know that, and still…”

Harry knew all about misplaced guilt, and how sometimes it took a while for what you knew in your head to make it down to your heart. He stood. “I’m going to make you some tea,” he announced and started for the kitchen.

“Like hell you will,” Draco grumbled, trailing after him. “You never make it hot enough.”

Harry turned and caught him in a hug. “You always say that,” he said, nuzzling at Draco’s neck and relishing the scent of his soap and shampoo and the faint scent of cologne that always clung to him, though Harry had yet to catch him putting it on. His heart skipped a beat when he felt Draco’s arms slide around him. “I’ve missed hearing you say that.”

“I always say it because you never do,” Draco said, his face pressed so close to Harry’s that his lips brushed against Harry’s cheek when he spoke. “And I’ve missed you too. I just had a lot of things I wanted to get straight in my mind before we tried to pick this up again.”

“I’m sorry for—“

“I don’t want to talk about that right now,” Draco said sharply. “Later, we really need to have it out because I’m still *unbelievably* furious with you for lying to me, but for right now…” He trailed off and his arms tightened around Harry. “For right now, I just need you.”

Harry held him for a few more minutes before he took a step back and couldn’t resist tugging the hood up over Draco’s head. He brushed the hair off Draco’s forehead and smiled. “You look adorable like that.”

Predictably, Draco scowled. “You’re a loon,” he said and pushed the hood back down.

“Probably,” Harry agreed. “But you love me for it.”

“Merlin knows why,” Draco grumbled.

Harry’s heart pounded when Draco didn’t say anything more. He’d only been teasing, but Draco had agreed. But Harry knew their relationship was still on shaky ground. He could see it in the guarded way Draco watched him, in the stiff set of his shoulders and the way he kept his chin raised an arrogant fraction. This wasn’t the time to push him about it. “My charming

personality?" he asked instead, keeping his tone light. "My sparkling wit? My keen sense of fashion?"

"Says the man who owns a pair of pants with snitches on them," Draco said dryly as he turned away and stretched his arms over his head, and Harry recognized the strip of light blue waistband just visible about the loose pair of pajama bottoms he wore slung low over his hips.

"Says the man who's wearing them right now," Harry shot back, and he couldn't help but grin.

"Well, then," Draco smirked over his shoulder. "If you want them so much then come and get them, Potter."

He said it like a challenge, and Harry had never been able to resist a challenge from Draco Malfoy.

Epilogue

At the sound of the front door opening, Harry tossed aside the magazine he'd been trying to lose himself in so he didn't waste any more time staring at the clock and willing it to go faster, which, despite his best efforts, absolutely didn't work. He pushed himself off the sofa and hurried to meet his husband.

"How was your appointment?" he asked as Draco toed off his shoes, trying and failing to hide his eager anticipation.

"Fine," Draco said and glanced around with a small frown. "It's too quiet in here. Where are the children?"

"Over at Ron's," Harry replied. He grinned. "I thought it best to get rid of them for the afternoon."

"Well. I suppose I should just be thankful you didn't Stun and Body-Bind the lot of them." Draco shot him an amused smirk. "Fourteen years, Potter. One would think you'd have learned a little self-control by now."

Harry would have thought that fourteen years would be long enough for Draco to stop making fun of him for something he hadn't even been present for. He chose to be the bigger man and let it go. And also to focus more on the line of conversation more likely to lead to sex. "Around you? Never," Harry said, taking Draco by the wrist and tugging him up the stairs to their bedroom. "And you love it."

"It is flattering, I'll give you that," Draco sighed in that half-amused, half-put-upon way of his.

As always, Harry's gaze lingered on the portrait hung at the top of the stairs. In it, Harry and Draco sat close together on a sofa, with James sitting beside Harry, the twins Scorpius and Albus standing in front, and Draco cradling baby Lily. Harry had ordered it commissioned five years ago, just a few months after Lily was born. "Now that our family's complete," he'd told Draco. Really, Harry had been happy with their three boys, but Draco had insisted on trying once more for a daughter. Now Harry couldn't imagine life without his little girl.

He didn't realize he'd stopped walking until Draco gently tugged his wrist free and linked his fingers with Harry's.

"What are you looking at?"

Harry turned away from the portrait. "Sometimes I can't believe how lucky I am." He shook away his sappy thoughts and grinned at Draco. "And now, about getting lucky…"

Draco rolled his eyes. "That was awful, Potter, even for you."

Harry leaned close enough that the tip of his nose brushed against Draco's. "Call me Potter like that again and we won't make it to the bed."

"You're impossible," Draco said as he turned away and sauntered off down the hall to the bedroom. He paused in the doorway, smirked, and tossed over his shoulder, "Potter."

Harry hurried after him and caught up with him just beside the bed, and slid his arms around Draco to work open his buttons as he nibbled at the back of Draco's neck. This was his favorite part, and had been since the second time Draco had announced he'd 'booked an appointment.' He did it every three or four years, always just before his birthday, and never told Harry what he'd gotten or where he'd had it put, leaving it instead for Harry to find on his own.

"I'd have thought you'd wait for next year to do this," he murmured against the nape of Draco's neck.

Draco hummed and let his head fall forward as Harry scraped his teeth over the back of Draco's neck. "And why is that?"

"Well, you're forty next year," Harry said, drawing away a little. "Isn't that a major one?"

Draco aimed a smirk over his shoulder. "Who says I won't get another one then?"

"Just a year apart? You'll spoil me," Harry said and worked open another button. "Also, you'd run out of blank skin if you kept up that pace."

Draco laughed. "Maybe we'd have to start on you." He half-turned to look at Harry. "I think it's funny that you're so wild about my tattoos and you don't have any."

Harry pushed at his shoulder to turn him around again. "I like them on you."

He finished with the last of the buttons and slid Draco's shirt away, his eyes already scanning over the familiar images. The most obvious was the hawthorn tree on Draco's back, the dark trunk running straight up his spine, the boughs branching over his shoulder blades. Now, in the first days of June, the leaves were nearly hidden by the flowers blooming from it, and Harry couldn't resist brushing his fingertips over them, watching them shiver as if in a breeze. He especially loved doing that in the autumn, when each stroke of his fingers brushed a small flurry of orange leaves free of their branches.

Below the tree was a field of lilies and narcissi, and those bloomed year round, even in winter when the hawthorn's branches formed a skeleton web over Draco's back. Harry knew that if he watched long enough, there was a tiny snitch that zipped around the tree, sneaking through the branches and dipping low to skim the flowers. Draco had come home with that one three years after getting the constellation on his arm, and Harry had spent long and wonderful hours of his life since then with Draco stretched out naked on his stomach, and Harry propped lazily on one elbow, trying to pin the little golden blur beneath one fingertip while Draco laughed and teased him that his Seeker abilities were slipping.

There was nothing new on his back, so Harry turned his attention to Draco's arms. There was the green serpent curled around Draco's right bicep that responded to parseltongue, and the four intricately patterned bands around his left bicep that shifted to spell out their children's names when touched. Both forearms were already taken, one by the constellation and the other by scarring. There was the dragon tattoo down his left side, and his right side was still blank. Maybe he'd gotten something on his legs this time?

Harry reached around and slid his hands lower to pull at Draco's belt buckle, and Draco laughed.

"Skipping ahead, are we? Usually you see what I've come home with before you take off my trousers." He turned to face Harry.

And there he saw it. He hadn't even considered that Draco might get something on his chest, not with all the scarring there. But just on his sternum, in a small diamond of unblemished skin hemmed in by four of the Sectumsempra scars, was his newest tattoo. A small heart. Nothing fancy or stylized, just a simple black outline the size of Harry's thumbnail.

"What does it do?" Harry asked, a little thrown by its size and simplicity. The tree was the last one that Draco had come home with, continuing the upward trend of complexity he'd started years before.

Draco brushed his fingertips over it, and the heart remained a heart. He let his hand drop and smiled at Harry. "Go on. Touch it."

Slowly, Harry reached out and stroked it with his index finger. The heart fell open as if hinged, softening into a smooth line that shivered once and shook itself into five letters of messy cursive. And Harry recognized his own name in his own handwriting. His own heart clenched.

"It only changes for you," Draco said as the signature smoothed itself out and curled back into a heart.

"I…" he began, but words seemed to have abandoned him. He swallowed. "Draco…"

"I love you," Draco said, nervously rubbing a finger over the heart. "This is the best way I know to show you how much."

It seemed sort of ridiculous to Harry, considering the rings on their fingers and four children between them and the fourteen long years behind them, but he absolutely understood, because this was the dragon tattoo all over again. Years before, Harry had marked Draco with the scars. This time, Draco was choosing to mark himself. So he showed Draco in the only way he knew how, not with words, but by bending slightly and pressing his lips to the heart. He imagined he could feel it opening beneath his mouth, transforming into his name. Above him, Draco sucked in a deep breath, and his arms went around Harry, holding him tight. Harry straightened in Draco's embrace and kissed him, and Draco's mouth was warm and familiar against his own.

Harry reached for Draco's belt again and worked it open, his mouth never leaving Draco's. As much as he would have loved to take his time, taking hours to worship Draco's body with his hands and lips and teeth and tongue, and have Draco take hours exploring every inch of Harry in return like they had in the early years of their relationship, Harry did need to hurry this along.

They may have every day of the rest of their lives to spend with each other, but for now the children would only be gone until suppertime.

Works inspired by this one

Auror Partners [ART] by Melcarrianna

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